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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

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FIRST MAY NUMBER

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RANGE OF FEAR
by J. L. Bouma

BEGINNING
THE FIGHTING TEXAN
a new serial
by Will Cook

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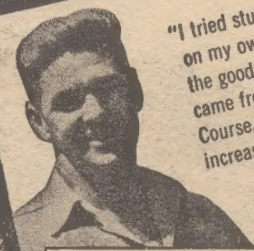

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST MAY NUMBER

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RANCH ROMANCES

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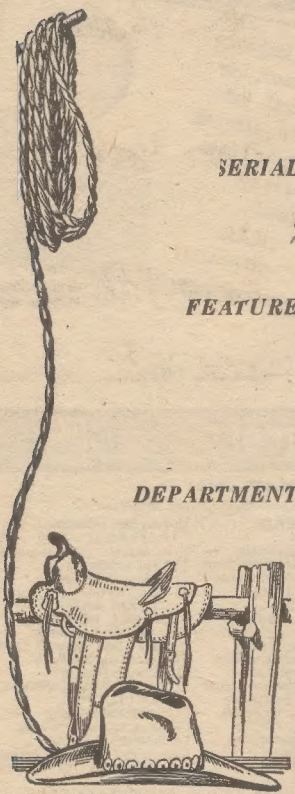

HELEN TONO
Editor

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Three Little Indians

Dear Editor:

We are three Cree Indian girl shut-ins in a sanatorium, and we get pretty lonely at times, so we hope we can get pen pals to correspond with. We promise all mail will be answered, because we'll definitely appreciate getting letters. Here are our descriptions: Marie Sutherland—hazel eyes, light brown hair, fair complexion, 5′ 6½″, age 19; Julie Mekish—black hair, brown eyes, medium complexion, 5′ 4″, age 21; Lorna Kirkness—brown hair and eyes, 5′ 6½″, age 25.

MARIE SUTHERLAND
JULIE MEKISH
LORNA KIRKNESS

C/O Brandon Sanatorium
10th Street
Brandon, Manitoba
Canada

Sixty-six Years Young

Dear Editor:

I love to read RANCH ROMANCES, and I hope my name will soon appear in the Air Mail column. I am 66 years old, retired, but am healthy, strong and full of pep. I'd like to correspond with women between the ages of 30 and 70. My hobbies are reading, writing letters, going to shows, and working around a kitchen. Will exchange pictures.

FRANK CARLTON ASHLEY

P.O. Box 43
Darrowzett, Texas

Sisters

Dear Editor:

Is there room in your column for two sisters from British Honduras? We've read the magazine for a long time. Sylvia, 15, is 5′ tall, with brown eyes and black hair. Yvonne, 14, is 4′ 9″, and also has brown eyes and black hair. We love all sports, and most of all love writing and receiving letters. We promise to answer all mail, so come on, boys and girls, drop us a few lines.

SYLVIA AND YVONNE JACOBS

112 Albert Street
Belize, British Honduras
Central America

Another Try

Dear Editor:

Here I am again trying to get a letter into "Our Air Mail." Sure hope I make it this time. I'd like to have a lot of pen pals, so, girls, why not write to me? I'll answer all mail, an will exchange snapshots. I am 38 years of age.

MARVIN JOHNSON

Route #3, Box 166
Siler City, North Carolina

Western Widow

Dear Editor:

I am a widow, 47 years old, with blonde hair and blue eyes. I'm 5′ 6″ tall and weigh about 145 lbs. I've written before, and do hope this time my letter will reach your Air Mail column. I'd love to hear especially from people on farms or ranches, but will answer all mail, and will exchange snapshots.

GLADYS HENSLEY

119 E. Gallagher
Los Cruces, New Mexico

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Good Gracious, Please Write!

Dear Editor:

Honest to goodness I really want a few pen pals. I like to write and receive letters better than I like to eat. I can tell about Texas to anybody who's interested—I've lived here all my life. I'm also a baseball fan, and I never miss the boxing matches on TV. I'm a widow, age 22, with brown hair and dark blue eyes. I'll write to all who want a pen pal, sure enough!

MRS. DORIS TAYLOR

R. 2, Myrtle Drive
Jacksonville, Texas

Talented Quartet

Dear Editor:

We are four girls who would like to receive letters from all over the world. We like to dance, sing, and play the piano. Everyone is welcome to write, but we'd especially like to hear from boys and girls of our own age, and from servicemen. Our descriptions: Nancy has brown hair, blue eyes, and is 5′ 3″. Ellen has dark blonde hair, blue eyes, and is 5′ 5″. Both of us are 18 years old. Joanne and Janice are both 17, and have dark hair and eyes.

NANCY BABB
ELLEN KNOUSE
JOANNE HESS
JANICE WHITERIGHT

Nancy—Box 21
Stillwater, Pennsylvania
Ellen—R.D. #1
Benton, Pennsylvania
Joanne
Benton, Pennsylvania
Janice
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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

BURGLARS who broke into a grocery store at Ashley, Ill., and sampled and left behind several varieties of hard cheese, were caught later and easily identified by the prints they left behind—teeth-prints, that is.

IT'S A soft life for the cows at a farm near Grand Rapids, Mich. All they have to do is line up and wait for a chuck wagon which arrives each day to serve them chopped feed.

FROM THE progressive town of Sidney, Nebr., comes the news that people are tired of red fire engines, and their engines from now on will be a new shade called smoke blue. Other cities are showing interest, and a trend may be in the making.

THE FISHING was good for a Gridley, Calif., woman, who not only caught two big bass, but found a wrist watch inside one and a gold ring inside the other.

A LAS VEGAS, Nev., hotel maid found a tiny pistol she thought was a cigarette lighter. She learned better after she tried to light a friend's cigarette, and the friend went to the hospital with a .25 calibre bullet in her hand.

COMMUTERS on the street car route between Los Angeles, Calif., and suburban Bellflower have been living it up since the conductor roped off a special section of the car for card players, and equipped the "game room" with cards, score sheets, and lap boards to use as tables.

THE SAVANNAH, Mo., post office had to forward a letter marked "Opened by grasshopper," after a grasshopper chewed the top and sides of an envelope left in a rural mail box.

A YOUNG housewife from San Francisco, Calif., is sure a bundle snatcher will be disappointed with the loot he grabbed from her. The large package contained nothing but three pounds of noodles.

THE LOCAL color of old Mexico has suffered a serious blow now that tortillas, once laboriously handmade by each cook for her own household, are being manufactured on the assembly line and sold in sanitary plastic bags.

CUSHING, Okla.'s constable forgot his badge, but tried to arrest a speeder anyway. Thinking he was a hijacker, the driver called the police. Meanwhile the constable called the highway patrol. By the time the resulting furore subsided, the constable swore he would never again forget his badge.

A MAN jumped off the bridge over a river near Phoenix, Ariz., planning to "end it all." He hurt his head on the sandy river bed, where there has been no water for years.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

SMOKE SIGNAL

Universal's new Western was rough and dangerous to film . . . and the thrills have been captured for your heart-in-the-mouth enjoyment

MANY'S the time I've described the dangers and privations of a movie company on location, but every adventure I've ever told you about was a tea party compared with the experiences of the cast and crew of *Smoke Signal.*

The hardships and narrow escapes of the people who made this new Western for Universal-International would make a movie in themselves. Come to think of it, why doesn't somebody make a picture about a company on location?

Imagine eleven actors and one actress packed into flatboats, making a 200-mile voyage down the San Juan and Colorado Rivers, where boulder-strewn rapids and tricky currents made navigation impossible. In somewhat more modern and maneuverable boats behind them was the crew, with three cameras bolted onto their decks.

On both banks, red sandstone canyon walls rose steeply as high as 1,000 feet. The company was thus completely cut off from the rest of the world, unable to climb out for help. Once they started down stream from Mexican Hat, Utah, they were on their own for eight days until they reached Marble Canyon, Ariz.

The star of *Smoke Signal,* Dana Andrews, said it was the wildest and most frightening ride he'd ever taken.

"And the most uncomfortable," added Piper Laurie, the one girl in the cast.

"Make it the most miserable," Rex Reason put in.

When I talked to them they'd just returned from this hazardous trip. They'd seen none of the footage and didn't know whether their suffering had been worth while.

And suffering it really was. Everyone, for instance, lost the skin from his fingertips, just from contact with the silt-laden water. Everyone's face was sunburnt, windburnt and chapped. All the cast had eyestrain from the sun on the water, because, unlike the crew, they weren't allowed to wear sun glasses.

"We had practically no contact with the

camera boats behind us," said Dana. "Most of the time we didn't know whether they were shooting or not, so we couldn't really relax at all."

Even when the sun went down, there was little comfort for the weary. They'd pull the boats ashore at the first likely spot, pitch a crude camp, eat a meal of canned food and roll up in sleeping bags for the night.

"The only good thing about our stops was the fire," said Piper. "By toasting yourself carefully—covering up the sunburnt spots—you could get dry once a day. Everyone, including me, was allowed only one change of clothing, but it wouldn't have helped if I'd brought a whole wardrobe, because everything we carried on those darn boats got wet."

At dawn the whole group got up, ate a quick breakfast, then started the ordeal of the river again.

For two days they were without fresh water, and nine crew members suffered from water poisoning from drinking river water. One ran a fever of 103. But he just had to get well without a doctor, and he did.

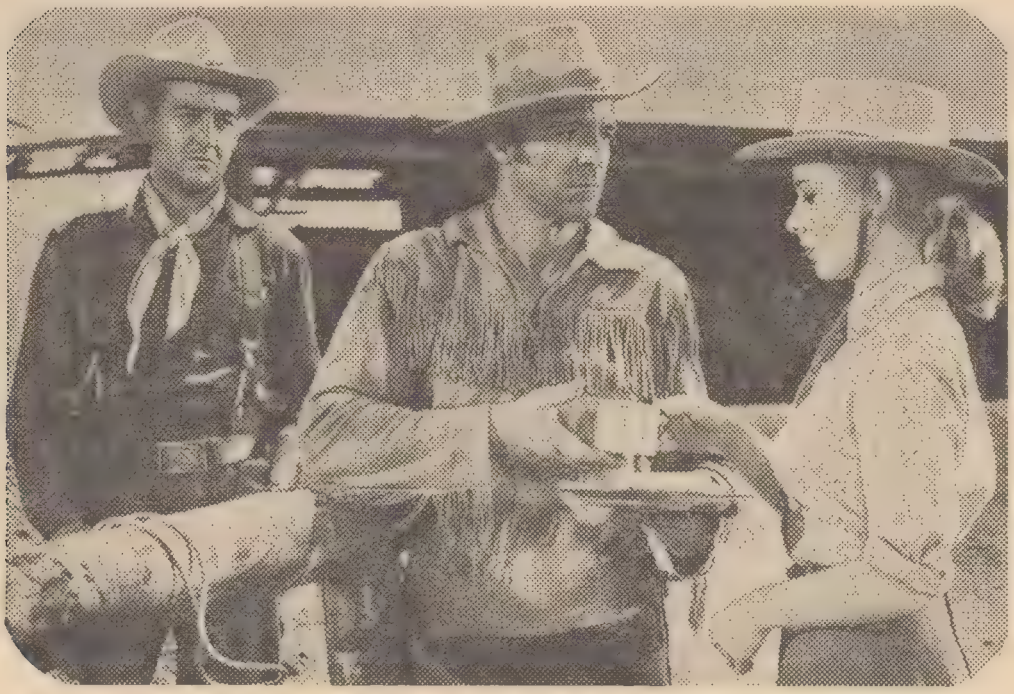
The closest call came to a cameraman, when the tripod snapped and his camera fell on his chest as his boat was bucking some rapids. He was knocked down, of course, but somehow he managed to stay aboard and to keep the camera from falling overboard too.

"I just hung onto it for dear life," he said later. "All I could think of was saving the exposed film. Otherwise we might have had to make that day's trip again."

When the company saw the scenes that had been shot, they all heaved a sigh of relief. The danger of the trip had been captured on film, and a really exciting outdoor movie had been made. So all they had gone through was worth it.

According to the director, Jerry Hopper, *Smoke Signal* offers you "the wildest, most gorgeous scenery in the world, and the most thrilling shots of river rapids ever photographed."

"And also," added Dana Andrews, "the wettest Western in history."



Piper Laurie provides a meal for Army deserter Dana Andrews

VICTOR MATURE
Easy-Going Guy

VICTOR MATURE explains his good-natured attitude toward life like this: "Everything always breaks right for me, so I just relax."

He claims he never worries and never has worried about his career, even when he was so broke he had to live in a tent in a friend's back yard. Nor did he worry about his life when he spent 30 rugged months on convoy patrol in the dangerous North Atlantic during the war.

I believe him—almost. It's true that Vic has a sunnier and more serene outlook than most actors, but it wasn't relaxation that got him to the top of a tough profession. It was hard work—if not hard drive—and hope—if not worry.

He left Louisville, Ky., under a cloud of parental disapproval because he wouldn't go into the family business. He was determined to be an actor in spite of all the pressure put on him to stay at home.

When he got to California, he enrolled as a student in the Pasadena Playhouse, using the last of his grub stake, and supporting himself afterward by cleaning cars, washing dishes and janitoring. He was in 60 plays before he got a part in which anyone noticed him.

But Hal Roach finally did, and gave him a part with Joan Bennett in *The Housekeeper's Daughter*. By this time he was worse than totally broke. He'd given up his menial jobs in order to devote his full time to the Playhouse; he was living in the aforementioned tent; he was so deeply in debt that it took a year of being on salary to Hal Roach before he was solvent enough to buy himself a car.

Just as he was getting well-established in Hollywood, he chucked the movies temporarily to go to New York to play with Gertrude Lawrence in *Lady in the Dark*. The only regret Vic has about that detour is that while he was there he got tagged as "Hollywood's Gorgeous Hunk of Man" and he's been living that monicker down ever since.

He came back to Hollywood and a 20th Century-Fox contract. At that studio he has played leads in 22 films, and on loan-out he's played 11. His next movie, which Universal will soon release, is *Chief Crazy Horse*, in which he plays a Sioux Indian.

During most of his career Vic has been known as a playboy and a zany character. He was a constant patron of nightclubs. His home was any hotel room where he hung his hat, though once he took up fairly permanent residence in his studio dressing room. His reputation as a sloppy dresser in those days exceeded Marlon Brando's now. He was so seldom seen with two socks of the same color on his feet that people began to suspect they were mismatched on purpose.

When Chief Boatswain's Mate Mature got back from his three and a half year hitch in the Coast Guard in 1945, it looked as though he was the same old mad Vic. He hit all the town's high spots, looking for laughs. Then everyone, including Vic, found he had changed.

What he really wanted was to settle down. He married a nice gal named Dorothy Berry, who wasn't and isn't an actress. He bought a big comfortable home and moved in to stay. Instead of hitting the nightspots he took up golf.

He even invested his money. Today he owns a television store, two appliance stores, and a furniture store. He built office buildings on property he owned. Vic is a solid citizen now.

"I'd never have believed it," he told me, "but it's just as easy not to worry about being well-fixed as it is not to worry about being broke."

Universal

If Vic looks solemn, it's just to fit his* Chief Crazy Horse *role

LEE MADIGAN had been spoiling for a fight with the Turcotts for years . . . and now he was going to crush them or die in the attempt!

Range of Fear

by J. L. BOUMA

THEY rode through the dusty heat of June and trotted between Vista's frame-and-adobe buildings. As they approached the square, where traffic circled the granite statue that dominated the street and the town, they slowed their horses.

Buck Corwin remarked dryly, "Every time I see that statue, I'm reminded of how old Evan Turcott would make a man go out of his way to get past him. Damned if he still isn't doing it."

"Water's still free, anyhow," Lee Madigan murmured.

The two men stopped to let their horses drink at the wide, cement trough that encircled the statue. On the

smooth face of the rock pedestal the chiseled letters read:

EVAN TURCOTT
1826 1886

Below, and as though stamped there with the branding iron which the figure gripped in its granite right hand, was the Hatchet brand.

Lee Madigan looked up at the haughty, arrogant face, at the wilful eyes that seemed still to be gazing across the valley. And yet there was something pompous about the monument the man's pride had demanded even after death. It was as though he wanted to be assured that his presence would always be felt where he had once ruled—and where now his son, Ed Turcott, carried the whip.

Lee said softly, "Someday, someone's going to pull that thing down and clear the street."

He turned in the saddle, a tall, broad-shouldered young man in dusty range garb. He saw that someone had hung a wreath on the door of Albert Gavin's newspaper office. The three men on the steps of the Cattlemen's Comfort held his attention briefly. They were Hatchet riders. One of them was a burly man named Red Weaver. Red looked at him and said something that made the others laugh, and a hint of rage kindled in Lee's eyes.

He murmured, "Let's get this over with," and turned his horse away from the trough.

As they passed the hotel at the opposite end of the square, someone called his name from the veranda. He saw that it was Ken Osborne, his partner. Osborne came down the steps, a harried look on his handsome face.

He said anxiously, "Have you seen Cora?"

Lee shook his head. "We just got in." He thought with mild impatience that Ken should learn to keep track of his own wife—either that or get rid of her. "You been over to the funeral parlor?"

Osborne hadn't. "I'll be over later on," he said, and his worried eyes searched the street. "Dammit, I wish I knew where I could find Cora."

"She's likely visiting," Lee said. "You staying in town tonight?"

"I reckon," Osborne said, and turned back to the veranda.

LEE and Buck rode on along the street, past Rita O'Donnell's big saloon and on down to Plummer's funeral parlor. There they racked their horses. Plummer, his gaunt face expressionless, led them to a back room, where Albert Gavin was already laid out in his coffin.

Lee, hat in hand, looked at the dead face for a long moment. Albert Gavin had been a small, energetic man, wholly without fear—which was what had killed him in the end. His blistering editorials against Ed Turcott's rule of the valley had roused the homesteaders and the small ranchers to the boiling point. A bullet had been his reward.

Lee said softly, "Where was he hit, Plummer?"

"In the back," Plummer said.

"Is Desmond around?"

"At the saloon, I reckon," Plummer said. "Funeral's tomorrow at ten."

Lee looked straight at him. "You know anything about this?"

"Not a thing," Plummer said. "All I do is lay 'em out and bury 'em."

Buck said dryly, "I got an idea we'll be hard put to find anybody that knows anything to speak of. Let's go, Lee."

The two men went out and stood under the awning for a little while. Lee said finally, "You better go back to the ranch and get our Sunday duds, Buck. I'll get us a room at the hotel."

Buck looked up at his tall boss anxiously. "You'd better walk slow, Lee. I'd hate to pay my last respects to you in this place."

"It's a known fact," Lee murmured, "that Ed Turcott likes to do his own killing. See you later, Buck."

Lee swung into leather and rode back to the square. He noticed that Red Weaver and the two other Hatchet men were still out in front of the saloon, and he walked his horse past them deliberately, not looking their way. As he'd expected, Red said something and laughed. Lee pulled rein and put his flat, steady glance on the big man.

He said, "Something funny happen to make you laugh, Red?"

Red grinned. "Why, no," he said, "but maybe something will."

"Then you'd better make damn sure it's

funny," Lee said softly, and waited until the grin vanished from Red's face before turning right toward Stearn's stable.

Stearn, a stocky, red-faced man, came from the back as Lee swung down inside the big doors. He said, "You hear about it?" and Lee nodded. "Hell of a note," Stearn said, and spat. "Nothing but trouble."

"You know anything?"

"Only that it happened back here in the alley," Stearn said, "around ten last night. Gavin worked late at putting out his paper, and you know he always left by the back door and cut across the lot to his house. From what I heard, he got it just as he stepped outside."

"You work last night?"

"No. I had that kid, Joe Turkin, take over after supper."

"Did he see anything?"

"I haven't seen him, Lee. He was supposed to come in at noon, but he hasn't showed. He'd better, though, on account of I'll sure be swamped the next couple of days."

"Where does he stay?" Lee asked.

"When I use him, he generally closes up around midnight and sleeps in the loft." He stared at Lee. "Say, you don't suppose he saw something, do you?"

Lee knuckled his jaw. "It's an idea. But don't spread it around. How about his friends? Are there any he runs with steady?"

"None that I know of, except the girl that waits on table at the Chinaman's place—Agnes Durling, I think her name is. You going by to see her?"

"Maybe later on," Lee said. "First I want to see what Desmond has to say."

"That never does amount to much," Stearn said, and Lee shook his head and tramped outside.

HE PAUSED there a moment and looked along the alley, then paced down it to the back of the newspaper offices. What little sign there might have been had long ago been trampled out, but Lee made a careful survey of the area nevertheless. The rear of the stable was nearly even with the back door of the newspaper office, and the weedy grass back there, yellow and dry now in the summer, lay flat in spots. The killer could have stood there, Lee decided. Still, it would mean a twenty-foot shot in total darkness, so it was more likely that the killer had fired from the corner of the newspaper building itself.

It was a puzzle any way a man looked at it. A sudden impatience on him now, Lee returned to the square. He was about to enter the Cattleman's Comfort when he saw Rita O'Donnell emerge from the bank building on the opposite corner. He crossed over to her and she stopped and smiled at him, a tall, shapely woman in her middle twenties. She wore a green silk dress with a fetching bustle, and a small hat atop her wealth of coppery hair. A parasol protected her from the hot and yellow sun.

She said, "When did you find out about it, Lee?"

"One of Wilkinson's riders stopped by and told us. What are folks saying, Rita?"

She shrugged a shapely shoulder. "Most of them aren't saying a thing. Not where Hatchet ears can hear them, anyhow."

Lee said musingly. "Afraid of Ed Turcott. But you aren't, are you, Rita?"

Her smile was slow. "What do you mean, Lee?"

"Wasn't it you that put the wreath on Albert's door?" A pink flush was his answer. "You've taken sides, Rita. Do you know that?"

"I'm just following in Dad's footsteps, I guess."

Lee smiled, feeling a slow stir of pleasure. Mike O'Donnell had been his own man, and the daughter had inherited his independence. When Mike died she had made up her mind to run the saloon, despite the fact that it had lost her many friends, who considered such an activity unrefined for a woman.

He said, "Was Ed Turcott in town last night?"

"I don't know, Lee. But I did see Wes Bide on the street."

Lee nodded. Wes Bide was Turcott's foreman, the oldest man in years and service on the Hatchet payroll. Lee said, "This killing is going to have to force a showdown, Rita," and he saw her swift look of concern. "I don't know how it's going to work out, but something has to come of it. Albert was

stepping on Turcott's toes and had been for a long time, and there isn't a man in the valley that doesn't suspect Turcott killed him."

"Or had him killed," Rita said. "Either way, it's going to be hard to prove." She put a hand on his arm. "Be careful, Lee. You've already had trouble with him on boundary rights, and if you push him too far—"

"I know. He'll walk all over me, and he's got the men to do it. But if he tries he'll be in for a fight."

She said slowly, "Will Ken fight?"

Lee frowned. "Why shouldn't he? The ranch is half his, isn't it?"

"I know—" She hesitated. "I guess I was thinking of Cora. If he spent half as much time worrying about the ranch as he does about her—" She broke off again, sighed. "I don't like myself when I talk about people."

She smiled suddenly. "Will you stop by later? We could have an early supper together."

"I'll be up, Rita."

RITA touched his arm again and walked away. Lee crossed over to the Cattleman's Comfort, his mind troubled. What she had said about Ken and Cora was true. Ken had married Cora in Laramie two years ago, and had brought her south to the ranch. Within a week Lee knew his partner had made a mistake in choosing a wife.

Cora, dark and sensuous, could look at a man with her sulky eyes and make him want her. If the man didn't respond, she turned sullen and angry. That was what had happened when she learned where she stood as far as Lee was concerned. She had, more than once, made suggestive remarks to Lee while Ken was absent, until one day he told her bluntly to keep out of his way. She had, he knew, hated him ever since.

She was restless and grew bored easily.

Lately she had taken to spending most of her time in town, or riding alone on the range, thereby causing Ken more worry than was good for him. And though Ken had never mentioned it, Lee knew his partner suspected Cora of seeing other men. It made for touchy living on their small ranch. For a long time now Lee had spent most of his spare time with Buck Corwin, their sole rider.

Well, she was Ken's problem, Lee thought. He entered the saloon and stood for a moment inside the door, hearing the click of pool balls on the table in back. There were a dozen or more men scattered throughout the big room. He spotted Desmond chalking a cue, and saw him approach the table for his shot. The marshal was a pudgy man, with a tobacco-stained mustache drooping at the corners of his mouth. Lee saw that Red Weaver and the other two Hatchet men were also playing, and he wondered what they were doing in town on a work day.

Lee came up beside Desmond and said, "I'd like a word with you, Jack."

Desmond looked around with mild unconcern, his jaws working. He turned his head, spat a stream of tobacco juice at a cuspidor, wiped his mustache with his hand, and said, "Go ahead."

"Over here," Lee said, and started toward an empty table.

"We got a foursome going, Madigan," Red Weaver protested. "If you got something to say, say it."

Lee turned and looked at him with bland, hard eyes. "All right, Red, I'll say it. Here it is. Mind you own business when I'm around."

He saw malice break out on Red's blunt face, saw the man hesitate, then take a step forward, gripping his cue. Jack Desmond said quickly, "Never mind, never mind. You boys go ahead without me." He racked his cue and followed Lee to the table. "All right, what is it?" he said impatiently.

"I want the whole story of what happened last night."

Desmond shrugged, annoyed. "You likely

already know as much as I do. Gavin locked up shop and somebody got him in the alley. I was shooting pool and got there a few minutes later."

"Was Turcott in town last night?"

"Ed was out at the ranch," Red Weaver growled. He had come up unnoticed, and now he grinned wickedly at Lee. "Anything else you want to know?"

Lee ignored him. He said to Desmond, "What have you got to go on?"

"Not a thing. It's just one of these cases that'll likely go unsolved."

LEE glanced at Red from the corner of his eye. "What about that kid Joe Turkin, who works for Stearn? Was he around?"

He had the fleeting impression that Red stiffened. Then Desmond said, "I didn't see him. There was quite a crowd, though, so he might've been there."

Lee looked sharply at the marshal. Despite the fact that the town paid his wages, he knew that Desmond was more or less Ed Turcott's man. Still, it was hard to believe the marshal would know the identity of the killer, though it was possible that he guessed the truth. Either way, it made little difference, because there wasn't much to Jack Desmond.

Red growled, "What about this kid Turkin?"

So they know about him, Lee thought. Or at least they're worried about the kid. He said, "Turkin was at the stable last night. Now he seems to be missing."

"Is that right," Red said. "So where would he be?"

"You tell me."

Red grinned. "What the hell do I care? Anyhow, what difference does it make?"

"That's right," Desmond said. "You don't think he killed Gavin, do you?"

"No. But it's possible that he saw the man who did." Lee paused, looked straight at Red, and said softly, "A man who was supposed to be at his ranch last night."

"Why, damn you—" Red began, then put his head back and roared with laughter. "Now that's really funny, and I'm laughing."

"Red," Lee said softly, "I don't think it's a bit funny."

Red growled something, and lunged for him. Lee met him with a driving fist that caught Red in the temple and stunned him. Before he could recover, Lee hammered him on the side of the jaw and drove him to his knees. Red looked up with dazed eyes.

"You're not big enough or tough enough, Red," said Lee coldly. "Not you, nor any other Hatchet man. Tell Turcott that when you see him." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and tramped out of the saloon toward the Chinaman's restaurant.

Something—the thought of Red's reaction to the name Joe Turkin, perhaps—made him stop and look back. And he was somehow not surprised when he saw Red legging it across the square to the hotel. Did this mean that Turcott was in town? Frowning, Lee went on to the restaurant.

The waitress on duty said Agnes Durling came on at five, and that she had a room at Mrs. Carter's boarding house. On the way over there, Lee Madigan stopped by the livery stable.

"I still haven't seen any sign of Joe Turkin," Stearn told him. "Never could depend on that kid, though."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's shiftless," Stearn said, "like most of those hill people. He's from up there along the Ridge, you know. Got big ideas, but never does anything about 'em."

"He must have a lot of friends up there."

Stearn shrugged. "Could be. But you know how those folks stick together."

"You know anything about that girl of his?"

"She's a mousy little thing, but she seems to like him."

Lee thanked Stearn and went on to the boarding house, where Mrs. Carter showed him upstairs. She knocked on a corner door and said, "Someone to see you, Agnes."

WHEN the door opened, Lee saw a thin-faced girl in a faded dress. She looked at Lee with a quick fright showing nakedly in her pale eyes.

Mrs. Carter left them, and Lee told the girl his name. "Do you mind if I come in for a minute, Miss Durling?"

Her hand gripped the edge of the door. "Why?"

He stepped past her, and her lips tightened to a pale line. He said gently, "It's about Joe Turkin. Do you know why he left town, or where I might find him?"

She lowered her head and clasped her fingers. "How should I know?"

"You've been seeing him." Lee paused, then added casually, "You saw him last night, didn't you? So I thought he might have told you where he was going."

"What makes you think I saw him last night?" she asked suspiciously.

"You wouldn't lie about it, would you?"

She took a deep breath and said defiantly, "All right, so I saw him for a few minutes last night. What about it?"

"He's in a tough spot, Miss Durling."

"Why?" she asked, not looking at him.

She knows something, Lee thought. He said carefully, "When a man witnesses a crime and keeps quiet about it, the law can make it tough on him." She stared at him. "On top of that," Lee went on, "the man who committed the crime will also be looking for him. And you should know what'll happen if he finds Joe."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said sullenly. "Joe went to look for work. I don't know where."

"You love him, don't you?"

"Yes!" she burst out. "He's the only one in the world who's ever been nice to me. Joe has plans, and—" She broke off.

"What kind of plans?" Lee asked softly.

"That's none of your business!" she flared. "Now you get out of here!"

"A good man was murdered last night, Miss Durling," said Lee. "And if Joe saw it happen he should come forward and say so."

"They'd only kill—" She stopped, a quick dismay on her face.

"So he did see it happen."

"I didn't say so. And I don't have to talk to you, so get out."

Lee looked at her, disliking this part of it. "Has anyone else been to see you about this?"

She stared blankly at him, and slowly shook her head.

"What I'm trying to say is that Joe isn't the only one in danger. I'm here because he's missing, and the killer might come here for the same reason."

She gasped and sank down on a chair.

"If he doesn't already know it, he's bound to find out that you've been seeing Joe. And I'm sure that if Joe knew you were in danger, he'd want you to talk."

"But I don't know where he went," the girl wailed.

"What did he tell you?"

"I only saw him for a few minutes in back of the restaurant. That was right after the shooting. He said he was leaving town for a while, and that he had a chance to get some money and would send for me. That's all he said."

"Didn't he mention the shooting?"

"No. But I guessed later that was his reason for leaving."

Lee looked carefully at her and decided she was telling the truth. He said, "It would be a good idea for you to keep out of sight until this business is settled."

"But I have to go to work in a few minutes."

"Suppose I stop by the restaurant and tell them you're sick?" Lee said. He thought a second. "You could stay at Rita O'Donnell's place and be safe there. But you'd best wait till dark and go up the back stairs, and don't tell anyone about it. All right?"

SHE hesitated. "You really think I'm in danger?"

Lee said carefully, "Joe evidently saw what happened last night. If the killer thinks you know where to find him, he'll stop at nothing to get to you."

"Then I'll go," the girl said.

"She'll be expecting you," Lee said, and went out, thinking about what she had told him. Turkin had run, he had plans, and he had spoken to the girl about getting hold of some money.

Lee disliked what this implied. He turned onto the main street, struck suddenly by the fact that the town was crowded. He saw a number of tethered wagons on the big vacant lot back of the feed store, the teams tied to the tail-boards. A small crowd of farmers in bib overalls and straw hats squatted on their heels in the shade of the clapboard building. Riders and rigs churned dust in the street, and the boardwalks were thronged with the

slow passage of men, women and children. Another small crowd completely blocked the walk in front of Albert Gavin's newspaper office.

For Gavin had championed many of these people, and they had come to pay their respects, and perhaps to wonder what lay ahead. As though in defiance, or perhaps to parade their strength, a dozen Hatchet riders galloped through the traffic and surrounded Evan Turcott's statue.

Lee entered Rita's place, nodded at Jorgeson behind the bar, and walked past the idle drinkers to the wide stairway with its varnished railing.

There were two doors on this balcony overlooking the big room—one leading to her living quarters, the other to her office. Lee knocked on the office door, heard her speak, and went inside.

She rose instantly from her desk, smiling at him, and said, "This is nice." She waited expectantly, almost impatiently it seemed, until he took her in his arms and kissed her mouth.

They held each other for a moment with full awareness before he kissed her again, and she murmured, "Well," in a pleased sort of way.

"I'd like you to do something for me, Rita," Lee said, and told her about Agnes Durling. She listened quietly, her eyes on his face, as he finished his brief account.

"I'll be glad to have her here," she said. "But what do you suppose this boy Turkin has in mind?"

"I can't be sure, but it's just possible that fool kid will try to blackmail Turcott. What else would he mean by plans and money? If he had any sense at all, he'd know he'll be a dead man if Turcott ever gets hold of him."

"Turcott might not have done the shooting, Lee."

"Then he had it done." A brash recklessness rippled across Lee's face. "One way or the other, he's back of it."

He left a few minutes later and stood on the walk for a little while. The stage from Tenmile entered town, leaving behind a ribbon of dust that sparkled in the dying sunlight. As Lee started back to the hotel, he saw Ken Osborne leave the veranda and turn left across the square, his gaze shuttling back and forth across the crowd. Still looking, Lee thought. There would be hell to pay when Ken found her. Maybe not, though. Cora could handle him all right.

CHARLIE OBER had stopped his stage in front of the hotel, and Lee said hello to him as Charlie came out, climbed to the box and drove on to the depot.

The clerk was not there when Lee entered. He came down the stairs a few minutes later, and Lee signed for a room. "Buck Corwin will be in," he said. "We'll bunk together." Then he remembered something and glanced along the list of names on the register. He looked up. "Did Red Weaver come here to see Turcott a while ago?"

The clerk hesitated. "He might have."

"Turcott is here, isn't he?"

The clerk grinned. "Didn't you just see his name on the register?"

"I want to make sure he's in."

"He is. I just took a letter up to him."

Lee, about to turn away, looked sharply at him. "A letter? Doesn't he get his mail at the post office?"

The clerk shrugged. "This envelope didn't come through the post office."

"Did Charlie deliver it?"

The clerk shrugged again and did not answer, which was answer enough. Lee tramped upstairs and came up to the wide hallway just as a woman came out a door. She wore a red dress cut low to the swell of her breasts, and her coal-black hair had been combed back severely to a low knot. Over her full-lipped sensuous face came an expression of panic as she saw Lee.

There was a moment of silence, during which it seemed she meant to fling the door open and plunge out of sight again, but she didn't move.

Lee came forward, saying softly, "Go to your room and stay there."

"Lee, I didn't—" she began, coming toward him, hands outthrust, eyes beseeching. But he cut her short. "Get going. Ken's liable to be up here any minute."

For a second she looked at him with a mixture of scorn, contempt, hatred perhaps, then flashed along the hall with a rustle of skirts.

Lee looked after her, then turned to the door from which she had emerged.

He knocked and heard footsteps, and a curt, "What is it?"

He muttered something. A bolt slid back, the knob turned, and he shouldered through the door so violently that the man behind it staggered back and fell over a walnut chair.

Ed Turcott glared at him, then jumped to where a coat hung from the back of a chair.

Lee murmured, "Don't try it, Ed." He closed the door and stepped to one side, fingers spread above the butt of his gun, and watched Turcott straighten slowly.

Turcott put his hands on his hips and spoke in a high whisper. "Get out of here, Madigan."

Turcott was in his early thirties, though his eyebrows, the wispy mustache, and his long, curly hair were pure white. It made a dramatic contrast to his thin, brown, wild face, that was ageless, as were his pale green eyes, that never reflected an inner fire.

Lee droned, "If she were my wife I'd kill you, Ed. And Ken will—if he finds out."

Tall, gracefully slender, Turcott grinned at Lee. As always, whether on the range or in town, he wore a brown serge suit, the coat of which now hung across the chair, and a brocade vest against which was looped a watch chain of gold nuggets.

He said, "You won't tell him."

"No. I came here to tell you where you stand, Ed."

TURCOTT'S thin lips drew back in a grimace of rage, but he said nothing. Lee crossed the room slowly, lifted the coat, and saw the holstered shell belt beneath it.

"You should remember always to wear this, Ed. You wore it last night, didn't you?"

"I should have stopped you long ago, Madigan."

Lee smiled. "I'm giving you a chance right now."

He took Turcott's gun, and his own gun, and tossed them behind the sofa. Turcott, hands still on hips, appeared to balance on his toes. He was alert and enraged behind his grin, but not afraid. He had inherited more than a ranch at Evan Turcott's death; he'd inherited the other's willful arrogance, the cold cruelty, the harsh pride that could never forgive or forget a slight. He, like his father, had been born to take what he wanted, with no need of ever being afraid.

As Lee moved the chair deliberately from between them, Turcott leaped toward the table, grasped the ornate lamp, and threw it with a quick snap of his arm and body. Lee ducked, heard the lamp shatter against the wall.

Lee said, "This is only partly because of Cora, Ed." His voice was coldly gentle. "Hatchet can bully smaller outfits. But when you took it in your head to kill a good man, you went too far."

But that wasn't all of it either, he thought, as he closed in on the other. It had been coming for a long time, and this was the moment to force the issue. Before he had always felt a need to walk softly, not out of fear but because of a desire to avoid violence.

Now that time had passed. To murmur about Gavin's death and do nothing would only strengthen Turcott's position in the valley to a point where all men would fear him. So fighting him now was at once an attack, and a defense against the future.

Lee's fist lashed out, but Turcott, wiry and cat-quick, moved away from the blow and struck Lee a hard-knuckled punch to the temple, then leaped away again. Lee remembered now that, as a young man in an Eastern college, Ed Turcott had practised the art of self-defense.

Turcott moved lightly, posed almost, with his left arm out, the elbow crooked, his right fist cocked below his chin. Lee followed. He crowded Turcott toward a corner, flinging chairs aside as he went. He saw Turcott stop and appear to hesitate. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the other's hard fists struck his face and his head, and hammered his body.

Head down, his mind dazed, realizing suddenly that the attack had stopped, Lee looked up to find Turcott grinning at him. Turcott said, "You're not fighting Red this time, Madigan." And again he leaped in, coldly confident, the wild grin carved on his brown face.

Lee gave ground slowly. Turcott was hurting him now, and he waited and watched for

an advantage. He had struck four times at the other, and had missed each time. Once Lee stumbled against a chair and went to his knees, and Turcott's boot swung in a vicious arc and skinned the side of Lee's jaw. Lee, still on his knees, hurled the chair at Turcott's legs, but the other dodged nimbly aside, and laughed.

Now, bright with confidence, he stalked Lee again. As he came in, Lee leaped forward with all the driving power of his body and struck Turcott on the bridge of the nose. The impact drove the other against the wall with a jarring thud.

BLOOD pouring from his nose and across his brocade vest, Turcott snaked away from the wall as Lee closed in. But a blow caught him in the body, half turned him. It was then Lee drove a fist to Turcott's jaw that lifted the man from his feet. He fell across the table, rolled, and landed heavily on the floor, and did not move.

Lee stood buckle-kneed in the center of the floor. He was winded and hurt and bleeding, and it was only when he heard the exclamations that he looked up and saw several men crowding into the room.

One of them, Wes Bide, a stocky man of forty, looked at Turcott and then turned to Lee with an outraged expression on his blunt

Lee smelled wood smoke as he turned into the ranch road

face. He said acidly, "You did it this time, didn't you?"

Lee took a ragged breath. "I meant to do it," he said. "And that's not the half of what he's getting. You tell him that when he wakes up."

He shouldered out of the room, Bide's acid gaze on him, and saw Ken Osborne's worried face at the door. Ken said, "This is bad. Let's get you cleaned up."

Lee found his key in his pocket, and unlocked the door to his room. He said, "When did you get here?"

"A while ago. I was in talking to Cora when we heard the building shake." He sat on the edge of the bed looking glum, sour and dissatisfied. "What started it?"

"A number of things." Lee poured water from the pitcher into the bowl, wet a towel and patted his cut and bleeding face gingerly.

"You see Buck?"

"No."

Lee looked at his partner, and saw the other's gaze shift from his. He said flatly, "What's wrong with you? You know things have been pointing this way all along, don't you?"

Ken shrugged and stared sourly at the floor. "It isn't that." He paused, then looked back at Lee out of his harried eyes. "And don't think I'm saying this because of what just happened. I've had it in mind a long time, but—" He shrugged again.

"What is it?"

"You know as well as I do that it's Cora. She doesn't like it on the ranch, Lee. Then take today—she's been here and there, and I can't keep track of her. It worries me."

Lee dipped the towel and held it against the swelling below his eye. "It's none of my business, but why don't you smack her one once in a while?" Ken Osborne grunted. "What're you trying to tell me, Ken?"

Ken took a ragged breath and got up. "I want out," he said. "I want to sell my share in the ranch and take her away from here."

Lee turned, holding the wet, blood-stained towel in his hands. He said softly, "Think about that, Ken. We've been partners going on five years, and doing all right. And once we lick Turcott we'll do better. You want to give it all up?"

"The hell with Turcott!" Ken burst out. "It has nothing to do with him, except—" he broke off.

A quick apprehension rippled through Lee. "You know I don't have the money to buy you out—not if you expect to get cash. And the way things stand now, there isn't a man in the valley who'll take the chance of coming in with me."

KEN looked at him steadily, stubbornly. "Turcott will," he said.

"You'd sell to him?"

"Dammit, Lee, don't look at me like that! Right now the ranch doesn't mean a thing, compared to Cora."

"Have you talked to Turcott about this?"

Ken reddened. "What do you take me for? Of course I haven't talked to him about it.

You know I wouldn't do a thing like that without first telling you."

Lee felt an odd weariness settle on him. In one respect, Ken was right in wanting to get Cora away from here. Lee said, "What does Cora say?"

"She likes the idea. I figure we can go to Denver and I can get a job in the stock yards, live in town. She doesn't belong on a ranch, Lee."

"How much time are you giving me?"

"A week." Ken paused. "I don't like this any better than you do, but there's no use putting it off, Lee." He paused again. "Besides, you can't keep on fighting Turcott. Hatchet's roots are too deep. You'll be better off working with him than against him."

Lee said quietly, "Do you think for one minute that, even if I wanted to, I could work with him after what just happened?"

For a moment they stared at each other. And Lee felt a sickness of soul, because his partner's face was suddenly like that of a stranger's.

Ken said, "I can't help that. Cora's the only thing in the world that means anything to me, and you heard my terms."

He tightened his lips and wheeled out of the room. Lee heard him say something. Then the door opened again and Buck Corwin entered, carrying a large straw suitcase.

Buck said, "What's the matter with him?" Then he saw Lee's face and put the suitcase down slowly.

"I tangled with Turcott. Listen, Buck—" Lee thought a second, glanced at the window that was beginning to darken with early twilight. "Get my horse and bring it over to the stage depot right now."

"Am I coming with you?"

"No."

Buck turned to the door. "What's been going on? I just saw Red Weaver and three other Hatchet men riding hell-bent out of town."

Lee swore softly. "Hurry and get that horse," he said, and followed Buck out of the room.

He found Charlie Ober hunkered in the doorway of the stage company stable, watching a hostler rub down a horse. He called Charlie aside and said, "You delivered a letter to Ed Turcott at the hotel. Where did you get it, Charlie?"

Charlie squinted at him with quick curiosity. "Heard you tangled with Turcott. He's tough, isn't he?"

"Charlie, you liked Albert Gavin, didn't you?"

CHARLIE took a corncob pipe from between his teeth, and nodded. "Al was all right." He sucked at the pipe, removed it again. "I picked it up at Lund's relay station. Lund said somebody asked to have it delivered at the hotel."

"Who was it, did he say?"

"No," Charlie said, and returned to the stable.

Lee Madigan waited impatiently. Lund's station was ten miles West in the foothills, and for someone to leave a note or letter there to be passed along wasn't unusual. Had that fool kid Joe Turkin sent it? It was possible. Right after Turcott had received it, Cora had left his room. And at this very moment four Hatchet men were heading west away from town.

Lee saw Buck coming with his horse. As he swung into the saddle Lee said, "Tell Rita I'll be a little late," and spurred away along the street.

It was that quiet, brooding time between light and darkness. A pink flame still blazed in the western sky, but the air had a dusty look to it, and all the shadows had pooled and settled in the low places. A distant range of hills buckled darkly against the sky; beyond rose the mountains, their peaks already supporting the first flickering stars.

Lee followed the road for some five miles, to where it looped westward. Somewhere ahead of him rode the Hatchet men. Lee decided they would not break their necks to reach their destination. So, by following old and worn trails, Lee knew he had a chance to beat them to Lund's, if that was where they were going. He spurred his horse away from the road.

It was dark now, and only the stars, and the light from a half moon showed Lee the steep bank as he broke out of the thick brush. He urged his horse up the bank and onto the road, and so saw before him the smudge of

light that was Lund's relay station.

It was set about fifty feet back from the road, a long, low adobe building, with a corral and barn out back.

As Lee rode up, he saw that the station half of the building was in darkness. The last stage had passed through for the day. But Lund, with his passion for making money, kept his bar and grocery open late, on the chance that some passing rider might stop in for a drink or a sack of tobacco.

Lee dismounted on the far side of the building and went inside. Lund, a balding little man with glasses, came quickly from a back room and put his hands on the counter.

He said, "Hello, Lee." Then his lips pinched together and he studied Lee's fist-marked face guardedly. "What'll it be?"

"Whisky."

Lee fished in his pocket and tossed a twenty-dollar gold piece on the counter. Lund edged behind the bar and placed a bottle and a glass on the worn mahogany.

Lee had his drink. He said, "I'm after information, Ben. Somebody left a letter here for Ed Turcott. Who was it?"

Lund's glance went to the gold piece, and Lee said harshly, "My drink comes out of that, Ben. I don't like to buy my information, but I will if I have to. And if I do, we'll both remember it for a long time."

Lund adjusted his spectacles. "I don't like to get mixed up in this," he said, speaking almost defensively. "The Hatchet boys do a lot of trading here."

"Think fast," Lee murmured. "I don't like to crowd a man, Ben, but you're going to answer my question or you won't be here tomorrow to do business."

Lund looked quickly at him, a little fearfully perhaps, his eyes enormous behind the glasses. "A kid left it here," he said. "A kid named Joe Turkin."

"Give me my change."

Lund got it for him, and Lee said, "Take a drink out of it for yourself."

LUND hesitated between a two-bit piece and a half dollar. He said, "I'll have it after you've gone, Lee. Don't like to drink while I'm on the job." He picked up the half dollar and slipped it in his vest pocket.

Lee said dryly, "Any time, Ben." He picked up his change and went out, then paused a moment and listened hard. Finally there came to him the sound of trotting hoofs, and he mounted his horse and walked across the road into a tangle of brush. Gripping his mount's nose, he waited. He was frowning before he saw the horses, for he knew by the hoof sound that there were only two of them, and there should have been four.

The riders dismounted out front. Against the lamplit brightness of the open door, Lee made out Red Weaver's bulk. He turned his horse and rode away. Lund, he thought, would tell Red Weaver what he wanted to know. But he would not mention Lee Madigan unless asked, and there was no reason why Red should ask if Lee had been there.

Once out of hearing of Lund's place, Lee put his horse into a hard run, keeping to the road now. The kid had delivered the message all right, and it stood to reason that he wouldn't be hanging around here. His message to Turcott had likely only been a reminder of what he knew, a build-up to the pay-off. The kid had plans, and maybe he wasn't so dumb after all. But Turcott had taken no chances. He had sent Red to investigate.

But four Hatchet men had left town, and only two had arrived at Lund's. What had happened to the other two?

Lee's horse was done for when he stepped stiffly out of the saddle inside Stearn's stable. Stearn came over and said, "A Hatchet rider stopped by and asked about Joe Turkin after you left here this afternoon."

"I figured that would happen."

"And the town is really buzzing on how you handled Turcott." Stearn grinned. "I hear you busted his jaw."

"I tried hard enough."

"It's coming to a boil, Lee. There was a farmer had a scrap with a Hatchet man and beat the tar out of him, before Desmond stopped it and threw the farmer in jail for disturbing the peace." Stearn laughed. "Imagine that?"

"I want another horse—this one's played out. Nothing fancy—just one to get me to the ranch."

"What's up, Lee?"

"I'm going after Joe Turkin," Lee said.

He rolled a cigarette and smoked it down quickly while he waited, the taste of the tobacco rousing a sudden hunger in him. Stearn came with the horse and Lee mounted, said so long, and rode on down to Rita's place. He tied up in the back, took the outside stairs, and knocked on a door.

Rita appeared in a moment. She said, "Who is it?" and Lee told her. She opened the door and Lee came up against her in the darkness of the short hall.

"Jorgeson told me that Hatchet men have been in asking about Joe Turkin and Agnes," Rita said. And then, anxiously, "Were you badly hurt?"

"No," he said. "Where's Agnes?"

She led the way to her sitting room. "Asleep, poor child. She's been so worried."

"Come here," Lee said softly.

HE HELD her then, she smiling in that tender way she had with him, and he could feel the full, flowing curves of her body against his like a promise. He said, "This business is changing a lot of things around here," and told her about Ken's decision to sell his half of the ranch. "I don't blame him, I guess."

"But it's not fair to you," she said. "And doesn't a new partner have to meet with your approval?"

"We didn't sign any papers that say so," Lee said slowly, and shook his head. Ken can cut out his half of the stock and the range and sell it if he wants to. That won't mean Turcott and I'll be partners, of course, but it'll leave me with damn little to fight him."

He paused. "That's only a small part of it. All the small ranchers and the farmers in town today are involved. Even some of the hill folks, that likely haven't heard yet what happened, have a stake in this. Some of them, like old Sam Painter, were doing all right in the valley until old Evan Turcott drove 'em into the hills. And they'll stay there, and the rest of us'll have to back water from here on in, if Ed gets away with killing Gavin. And Joe Turkin is the answer to the whole riddle."

"Are you sure, Lee?"

Lee nodded. He told her all that had happened. "He's up there in the hills somewhere, Rita, and I'll have to go in there after him before Turcott gets the idea. If I can talk that kid into seeing the county attorney, the county can issue a warrant for the arrest of Turcott or of whoever killed Gavin. And even if it doesn't turn out to be Turcott, it might be possible to get the killer to admit that Turcott hired him to do the job."

"Sit down, Lee. Here, pour yourself a drink, and talk to me while I get supper on the table. It's already to serve. Do you think you can find Joe Turkin?"

"It won't be easy, especially if he means to go through with his plan and decides to keep out of my way. But there's—"

He broke off as Agnes Durling, in a robe too large for her, entered the room. She said, "I heard what you said about Joe. Are you sure he's the one?"

"Yes," Lee said, and told her about the letter. She listened attentively, face pale, lip caught between her teeth.

When he had finished she said, "I could write a note. Maybe if he reads it he'll change his mind about trying to get money out of that man."

A sudden hope rose in Lee. "It would be the best thing for him to do. Because even if Turcott is forced to pay him, he'll never get away with it. Sooner or later Turcott or some hired gunfighter will track him down."

The girl looked away. She said softly, "Joe's all right, but he shouldn't be on his own. He needs a steady job and responsibilities, or else he'll always get himself in trouble."

Rita smiled at her. "Joe's lucky to have you worrying about him. Now come along to the office and you can take your time writing the note while Lee and I have supper."

When Rita returned, she served the food and they ate in companionable silence. Every so often he caught her smiling oddly at him, secretively perhaps, as though at a pleased thought she did not mean to share. After a while Agnes came in with a sealed envelope, which Lee put in his shirt pocket.

"I hate to miss the funeral," he told Rita, "but this comes first." He rose from the table. "So I'd better get going."

"You haven't time to sleep a while?"

HE GRINNED, took her in his arms. "I "I doubt if I'd do much sleeping if I stayed here."

"Damn you," she said softly, and kissed him.

"I'll sleep for a few hours at the ranch," he said. "Have to pick up a good horse. I might be two-three days in those hills."

"You shouldn't go alone."

"It's the best way."

"I wish I could be with you."

"Who'd run the saloon?"

"Oh, damn the saloon," she said. "If you find the Turkin boy, what will you do with him?"

"I don't know yet. It all depends on what happens up there in the hills. Well, I'd better be on my way."

Rita followed him to the back door. "You take care of yourself. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Neither do I," Lee said. "Not when I have you to come back to." And he went down the stairs to his horse, and ten minutes later had left Vista behind him.

He smelled it first, a tang of wood smoke in the night air, as he turned between the two low hills on the ranch road. Before he saw the ruddy glow of smouldering beams and siding, he drew in, knowing what they had done to him. He circled wide and came in on the rear of the ranch buildings, hoping the men were still there, waiting. He tied his horse in a clump of live oaks, pulled his Winchester from the saddle scabbard, and strode quickly down the slope, the taste of reckless rage in his mouth.

He edged cautiously toward the yard and looked at the smouldering ruins of the barn and sheds and the house. Small flames crackled and popped here and there. As he looked on with bitter eyes, it came to him that two of the riders who had left town with Red Weaver must have done this. Turcott, enraged at the beating he had suffered at Lee's hands, had struck back quickly. Lee felt a hard and savage anger.

He stepped toward the corral. The open shed with its feed boxes had been burned down, and in the ruddy glow of the flickering flames he saw the huddled shapes of four horses, and knew they had been shot.

This was the pay-off, Lee thought grimly,

The farmers got a rope and pulled down Evan Turcott's statue

and stood a minute thinking of what he should do. He needed a certain amount of supplies and a better horse than the livery stable nag, to be able to tackle the hills. His nearest and best bet was Anderson's place, three miles to the west. Taking one last bitter look at the ruined buildings, he tramped back up the slope to his horse.

Anderson's house was in darkness when Lee trotted into the yard, but as he sat his horse and looked around, someone to his right said harshly, "Speak up! Who is it?"

"Lee Madigan."

TURNING his head, he saw the man loom out of the darkness, a rifle at his hip. He recognized Dan Anderson.

"After what's been happening, I'm not taking any chances," Anderson said. "You stop by your place?"

"You know about that?" Lee said.

"Didn't ride down there, but I spotted flames, and I figured it might be your place," Anderson said. "That's what comes of fighting with Turcott," he added bitterly.

"News travels fast," Lee said, and swung out of leather.

"I was in town when it happened. Left right after that. What happened, Lee?"

Lee Madigan told him. "I'll sleep here a few hours, if you don't mind. Get an early start out of here."

Anderson, a stringy man with gaunt cheeks, helped Lee stable the horse. Afterward they went inside and talked for a little while, Anderson saying the hill people were a suspicious lot, a fact of which Lee was well aware. He pulled off his boots and stretched out on the sofa. Next morning, before dawn, he was away.

At sunrise he was deep in a tangle of rolling hills that buckled upward to the steep and wooded mountains. This was rough country with no real roads at all; wheel ruts or horse trails led to scattered farms and hidden ranches.

The inhabitants were a taciturn and independent people for the most part, though many were shiftless, and if they had anything in common it was a fierce dislike and suspicion of strangers. Yet, Lee thought, not a few of them had, from Evan Turcott's time on, been up against Hatchet and had ended up holding the wrong end of the stick. That was Lee's only weapon—that knowledge plus Agnes's letter to Joe Turkin.

An hour later he traversed a brush-choked slope and came upon the forlorn holdings of a farmer—a shapeless log cabin bleached by weather to a dingy gray, a lean-to shed, and a sagging pole corral, in which two gaunt mules stood in utter dejection. Dried stalks of corn covered a patch of ground the size of a town lot; a thin-shanked pig grunted in its enclosure, and a few chickens scratched dirt in the dusty yard.

The owner, a thin little man in bib overalls and a big felt hat, came outside and regarded him with sullenly suspicious eyes.

Lee pulled rein.

"I'm looking for Joe Turkin," he said, and took the letter from his shirt pocket. "I got this for him. It's from the girl he's been going with in town."

"Who're you?" the man said.

"Lee Madigan. Me and my partner, Osborne, run Ladder." He paused. "Turcott burned us out last night."

"That's tough."

"It is," Lee agreed pleasantly. "Now where do I go to deliver this letter?"

"You might try the post office," the little man said, and turned to his house.

Lee struck out in the general direction of Sam Painter's place, but he was scarcely out of sight of the cabin when the crack of a single shot came from behind him, and he knew it to be a signal. He followed dim trails toward timber and, near noon, in a small mountain meadow, ran across a bunch of longhorns that bolted at his approach.

BEYOND the meadow, he picked up a worn trail that led through timber to the base of a gaunt rock shoulder. Patches of sunlight shone through the trees and lay upon the pine-needled ground. Riding on, he presently came upon a split-rail fence and followed this to a gate. The house and outbuildings were located in a cleft of the shoulder. On the porch, a rifle under his arm, stood a tall hawk of a man with a gray beard.

Lee raised a hand. "Howdy, Mr. Painter," he said. "Been a long time."

"Howdy."

"You hear about what happened to Albert Gavin?"

Old man Painter nodded cautiously, moving neither himself nor the rifle, his fierce old eyes nearly hidden below his bushy brows.

"I tangled with Turcott in town yesterday evening," Lee said. "Last night he burned me out."

"Light down," the old man said, and leaned his rifle against the porch railing. Lee approached the steps, leading his horse. "I tangled with old Evan one time," Painter said. "He burned me out, too. What's on your mind?"

"I'm looking for Joe Turkin." The old man said nothing, his fierce gaze steady. Lee decided it was best to tell the whole story, for it was doubtful that Turkin had told these hill people his reason for hiding out. The old man watched him thoughtfully as he talked. When Lee finished, they looked at each other silently.

Then the old man said abruptly, "You sure you can skin the skunk?"

"It all depends on what Joe Turkin knows."

The old man thought about this. Then he strode from the porch to the fence, cupped his mouth, and called, "Hiiiijaaaa!"

Excitement stirred in Lee. He took a long breath as Sam Painter returned to the porch. "Hiram'll take you to see him," the old man said. "He's been—"

He broke off and cocked his white head, as the faint echo of a shot reached them. And he said roughly, suspiciously, "You sure you came alone?"

"That's right."

"Well, then, there're others in the hills, and no more'n ten minutes from here."

"Turcott's men!"

"Maybe. Better climb on your horse, son. There's Hiram now."

As Lee mounted, he saw a stocky boy on a mule waiting at the gate. He thanked Sam Painter and rode over to join Hiram, who turned his mule and headed back past the shoulder.

"We'd better hump it," the boy said, and kicked the mule into a lope.

They traversed a slope of quacking aspens, dipped across a weed-choked gully, and followed a trail through a boulder-strewn field that lifted toward timber.

They had barely entered the trees when there came the sound of another faint shot, and Hiram said, "Whoever's back there has talked to old Sam."

"How much farther?"

"Up ahead a piece."

Hiram stopped almost immediately in a small clearing. and gave a bird call. Lee glanced back. Through the trees and the sparkling sunlight he could see the boulder-strewn field sloping away emptily.

"Here he comes," Hiram said. "I'll get out of sight and keep watch."

ON THE trail above them a horse had appeared. It approached at a walk. Lee waited. He saw a lanky boy of about eighteen, with a thin brown face and hair the color of straw beneath a scarecrow hat. Joe Turkin carried a rifle across the pommel, and his thin features were set in a suspicious scowl.

He pulled rein ten feet away and muttered, "What is it?"

"I got a letter from Agnes, Joe." Lee rode forward and extended the envelope. "You read it and then ask what you like." The boy took the envelope, his eyes wary. Lee said, "Better not waste any time. I got an idea some of Turcott's men are right behind us."

The boy grunted. He ripped the envelope open and read the note. "How come you know what I had in mind?" he demanded suspiciously.

Lee hesitated. He knew that if he said the wrong thing it might set the boy to running again. He said carefully, "A man makes mistakes, Joe, and you made more than one. You were at the scene of the shooting, and you ran. I'll tell you why—because you were looking for easy money. Isn't that right?"

The boy's scowl deepened. "Nobody ever did anything for me," he said. "A man's got to look out for himself."

"There are times a man has to look out for others, too, Joe. It's not often a man gets the chance to help other folks, but you have the chance now to help folks like Sam Painter, who took a licking from Turcott. And there are others who don't even know. But that doesn't make any difference. The point is, you'll be doing right, and helping them, by speaking up. And I'll tell you right now that if you got the guts to do this thing, every man in the valley'll take off his hat to you."

"Nobody'll listen to me in court."

"Did you see Albert Gavin shot?"

"Yeah."

"Did you see the man who shot him? Would you know him now if you saw him?"

"Sure. But nobody'd believe me."

"That's where you're wrong, Joe. Turcott's after you—I know that for a fact. Why do you think he—" Just then the sound of a bird call reached them. Joe Turkin gave a grunt of alarm and started to jerk his horse around, but Lee caught the reins.

"They will listen to you, dammit! Are you going to let all these folks down, Joe—and Agnes too?"

"Let go the reins! I'm getting out of here!"

"If you're man enough, you'll go to town, Joe. You'll go a roundabout way and get there around dark." Lee spoke urgently.

"Have Stearn put you up, and keep out of sight. I'll cover you here, let 'em chase me while you get away." He let go the reins.

Joe Turkin looked at him for a long second. Then he pounded up the trail and disappeared in the trees. Lee leaned over a little and looked back just as the bird call was repeated. He saw three riders sweep into view on the far edge of the boulder field. He straightened, waited a moment, then gave a yell and galloped forward. A shout lifted behind him, and the crack of a rifle shot.

The kid needs at least a half hour, he thought—if I can keep 'em guessing that long. And I mean to try.

HIS luck held. He knew that more than a half hour had passed by the time he swung past the rocky base of a mountain and fired another shot in their general direction. He had fired four times now, more to keep them from getting a clear look at him than anything else. He had worked westward and only now thought about getting back to town. Still, every minute counted for Joe Turkin, and Lee entered what appeared to be a long, shallow canyon, hearing behind him the distant strike of hoofs on rock.

The canyon deepened and Lee picked his way through the boulders that littered its floor. Pine lifted on either side along the steep slopes that ended at the base of sheer rock walls. Lee pulled rein and looked around, not liking this, but when he turned he knew it was too late to ride back; he glimpsed the first Hatchet man swinging into the canyon.

He rode on, a sense of apprehension in him now, aware that he had committed the fatal blunder of entering a box canyon. Already the high, steep walls blocked out the afternoon sunlight, while before him rose a sheer cliff of barren rock.

He turned his horse between two giant boulders and slid down. Then he ran back a dozen feet and flattened behind a cluster of smaller boulders. Hoof sound hammered toward him. A weariness dragged at his body, and he closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he saw the first rider come into view. He levered a shell into the chamber of his rifle, drew a bead on the man's chest, hesitated, and shifted his aim.

When he squeezed the trigger, he saw the man's right arm jerk, and heard him scream. The man dropped the rifle he had been holding, jerked his horse around with his left hand, and lunged out of sight. Lee put two shots from his Colt toward those boulders, and then reloaded the hand gun and placed it on the ground beside him. Then he removed his hat and looked carefully along either slope, thinking that the only way they could get above him here was to ride out of the canyon and follow one of the rims.

From now on it was a matter of waiting.

Suddenly there came a flurry of shots, and Lee heard the bullets keening from the boulders around him. He lowered his head a little, reached for the Colt, and put a shot back down the narrow canyon. Three of them, he thought. One of them out of commission, so that left two. He wondered if Red Weaver were one of them.

There was no sunlight at all in the canyon now, and no sound.

Lee dug a little rock from under his thigh, and waited. He felt the jagged edges of the rock in his fingers, and he suddenly tossed it sideways to his left, where there were more boulders. A rifle cracked instantly; the bullet made a whizzing sound as it struck rock and glanced off.

This time he did not fire an answering shot. He looked again up the wall to his right which, unlike the opposite wall, sloped a little. A man on foot could climb it, Lee decided, but not while there was still light and there were men below that could shoot.

Lee waited patiently. He wondered if these men thought they had Joe Turkin cornered. It was possible. But if Red Weaver were one of them and he learned the truth, it might not make any difference.

He wondered how Joe Turkin was making out. Suppose the fool kid hadn't headed for town? Suppose he had spooked and decided to try to make it out of the country?

It was a hell of a note all around, the way this business of Gavin's death had broken everything wide open—like putting a match to a powder keg. First there was Cora, and God only knew how long she had been seeing Turcott, or how many times—either in town or somewhere on the range. What could

you do with a woman like that except either smack her once in a while to keep her in line, or get rid of her? Or was Ken partly to blame?

KEN could have been firmer with her, Lee decided. He'd always given in to her, and so had lost his hold on the woman. The few times he had put his foot down she had started a quarrel, and he had given in after all. They were both all right; there was no real meanness in either one of them. But a man had to wear the pants, and if Ken didn't learn that he would be worried and unhappy the rest of his life.

It was darker in the canyon now, but Lee knew it would be another three hours at least before he could make a break. He heard a horse snort down canyon, and knew they were still there, waiting.

A few seconds later there came to him a sliding sound, and then a small rock bounced down the wall to his right, struck a boulder nearby, and bounded out of sight.

Lee's head shot up and around. About fifty feet above him, his booted legs planted firmly in the rocks, rifle leveled at his shoulder, stood Red Weaver, a triumphant grin on his blunt face.

"How do you like it now, Madigan?" Red called softly.

Lee looked up at the grinning face, and knew that if he moved he was a dead man. His rifle leaned against the boulder, while his Colt lay near his hand; by the time he reached for either weapon Red would fire.

But Red did not shoot at once. He grinned at Lee across the sights of his weapon, and Lee eased a breath into his lungs. "This isn't getting you the kid, Red," he said.

He saw the grin tighten, saw the figure become rigid, and Lee said mockingly, "By nightfall it'll be all over but the shouting, Red. Hatchet'll be finished and you'll either be dead or running."

"Why, damn you—" Red exploded violently.

As though his temper prompted it, he moved his feet a little, appeared to take a fresh grip on his rifle. And Lee moved. He palmed the Colt and rolled, as the rifle cracked and the slug threw up a spurt of dust. Then he fired, and missed. But it forced Red to crouch, to flinch, perhaps, and Lee, rock-still, aiming a little high, emptied his Colt at the man above him.

Red fired again, but the shot went wild. He straightened slowly, his hands empty, tore at his shirt front with both hands and coughed harshly, then pitched forward and rolled down the slope. He slammed like a sack of wheat against a boulder, within reach of Lee.

Even as the body struck, Lee had his rifle in hand and was looking past his barricade to where the other Hatchet man had been holed up. He had come forward a little, out of hiding, as though in anticipation, and now stood rooted at this unexpected turn of events.

When he saw Lee he fired hastily, and then lunged to get out of sight. But Lee put his bullet a foot from the man and called, "Hold it right there, and drop your gun!"

The man stopped, threw his rifle from him, and turned to face Lee, cursing. Lee glanced once at Red, then called the other man to him. "Where's the third fellow, the one I hit?"

"He rode to the ranch." The man's beard-stubbled face wore a look of outraged disbelief, but he spat as though to show he wasn't afraid.

Lee told him to unbuckle his gunbelt and throw it away. "Now get on your horse and ride. I suggest you pick up your gear at Hatchet and make it out of the country, because if I ever see you in town I'll kill you. Now get!"

Lee climbed on his own horse. He followed the fellow out of the canyon, and then headed for town.

IT WAS dark by the time he dismounted stiffly at Stearn's stable. Riding in, he had seen three big council fires burning behind the feed store, had seen the figures squatting or moving back and forth around them, and the tethered wagons. He had sensed the silence in the air, the tension, the suspended violence that gripped the town. The funeral was over, but the mourners had not returned to their homes. Stearn told him as much.

"It's you they're waiting for, Lee. I don't know how these things spread, but there's talk that you're hunting a witness to Gavin's

death. I kept my mouth shut, but I guess one thing leads to another. They know you had a run-in with Red at the saloon, and that you had your fight with Turcott, and then most of 'em have been around here in the alley to see where Gavin got killed, so I guess it just sort of built up from there."

"Is Joe here?"

"Sure thing. Up in the loft."

Lee heaved a sigh of relief. He had ridden all the way back to town with the feeling that the kid had run out on him. He said, "If anyone comes, whistle."

He walked back along the runway, past the stalls, and the horses, to the loft ladder. There he said softly, "It's Lee Madigan, Joe."

The boy's head appeared over the edge of the loft.

"Who was it, Joe?"

"Turcott," the boy whispered.

"You sure of that?"

"I swear it was Turcott. It was hot in here, so I stepped out that back door for a minute. A little later I heard someone in the alley, but I thought it was a drunk. Then Gavin came out of his place and locked his door, and someone said something to him. Gavin said something back like he was mad, and then there was this shot. That gun threw enough flame so I could see Turcott plain. Then he came right past me, because he had his horse tied in the lot."

"Didn't he see you?"

"Not exactly. But I guess I made a little noise, because he started back. That's when I ducked down the alley. He saw me for sure, then, but I don't reckon he knew who it was. Anyhow, he didn't try to follow, he just made a run for his horse and rode away.

"By that time a lot of others came running, and I kind of stayed on the edge of things until I had a chance to saddle my horse and get away. I knew for sure he'd figure out sooner or later who it was back of the stable." The boy paused. "I was scared, I guess. I figured if I went to the law I'd end up dead, so I thought about getting some money out of him. I'm glad now I didn't."

"You'll be all right, Joe," Lee grinned. "Now stay out of sight until I come for you."

He went back to Stearn, who said, "The whole Hatchet crowd is at the Cattleman's Comfort, Lee.

"Turcott too?"

"I don't know about him."

"Have you seen either Buck or Ken?"

"You'll likely find them at Rita's. What you got in mind, Lee?"

"I'm going to see Desmond and swear out a warrant for Turcott's arrest on a charge of murder," Lee said grimly. "And I'm going to see to it that Desmond serves it and puts Turcott in a cell. But first I'll stop by Rita's place and find out if she knows anything else." He started to walk away in the sooty darkness.

Stearn called, "What happened to Red and the others, Lee?"

"They won't be back," Lee murmured, and walked on.

THE main street was quiet and totally empty of traffic and pedestrians, and the stores and shops had closed for the evening. Light splashed through the windows of the Cattleman's Comfort and showed Lee the bunched horses there at the tie rail. He came up behind the hotel and went along the alley to the rear of Rita's place.

He had started up the back stairs when a voice at the top said softly, "Lee?"

"Yes." Lee went on up, having recognized Buck Corwin's voice.

Buck rose. There was a shotgun cradled under his arm. "There were two Hatchet men back here a while ago, trying to get in," he said.

"Anything happen at the funeral?"

"Lot of folks there, but it was quiet." Buck added, "Even Turcott showed."

"He would," Lee said, and opened the door.

Agnes Durling was alone in the sitting room. She rose expectantly, eagerly, as Lee entered. "Did you find Joe?"

"He's safe here in town," Lee said, and smiled, watching her look of utter relief. "We have you to thank for that. Your note to him did it. I couldn't have."

"I'm so glad," the girl said. And then, "Rita's downstairs."

Lee nodded, and passed through the inner door to the balcony. He stopped there a mo-

ment and looked down on the smoky room. The place was crowded and a murmur of talk lifted and swayed. Then someone saw him as he started down the stairs, and men became silent as they stared up at him. He saw Rita standing with Jorgeson, smiling proudly, hiding whatever worry she'd felt on his account, the way a woman should, but happy now to see him back. He found himself smiling back at her.

She came forward as he reached the foot of the stairs, and he said, "Is Ken around?"

"He hasn't been in."

"All right," Lee said. "I just needed to tell him something, but it can wait."

She smiled slowly. "What is it, Lee?"

"Turcott's men burned the place down."

She frowned faintly, then smiled again. "It doesn't matter. A man can always build again."

Lee looked at her, pleased by her reaction to the news, yet a little puzzled that she should take it so calmly. He said, I have to go across the street, but I'll be back," and saw her nod before he went forward through the crowd and stepped outside.

He started toward the square and had covered perhaps fifty feet when he became aware of sound behind him. He looked back. Then he stopped and stared at the group of men that had followed him outside, at the others crowding out of the saloon. And something happened to his heart.

The men had stopped as he stopped, and now stood there in silence—not a docile silence, not as if waiting for him to lead them, but as though they meant to follow regardless, out of respect perhaps. He made a gesture, then wheeled abruptly and went on to the Cattleman's Comfort, hearing the sound of them behind him like a promise.

HE PUSHED the doors open and stepped inside, then stepped forward and let them swing shut behind him. Hatchet men along the bar turned to face him; a pool ball clicked in back, and then there was silence. He saw Desmond through the smoky lamplight, holding a cue; and he saw Wes Bide frowning at him as though uncertain that this was Lee Madigan, before an expression of outrage flared on the Hatchet foreman's face. He said something to the next man, who nodded, and then Lee walked forward slowly and approached Desmond.

The marshal, still holding his cue, scowled resignedly, said, "Now what?"

Before Lee could speak, the door opened and men filed inside and formed a line against the opposite wall. They were farmers for the most part, only a few of them armed. Amusement flickered on the faces of the Hatchet riders along the wall. Then this amusement vanished as still more men crowded inside.

Lee glanced back and saw Dan Anderson and Stearn in the group, and two or three other owners of small outfits that had suffered at Turcott's hands. He waited until it was quiet, until the silence stretched and became taut, before he turned back to Desmond.

He said, "I want to swear out a warrant for Ed Turcott's arrest, and I want you to fill it out right now and make that arrest."

Desmond looked quickly at Wes Bide, then back at Lee. "On what charge?"

"On the charge that he murdered Albert Gavin. Let's not make any mistake about this, Desmond. I have the proof, and you're going to hold him until he can be transferred to the county seat for trial. If you don't we'll do it ourselves, and you'll be out of a job. So make up your mind."

Again the marshal glanced at Wes Bide, but this time in a resigned sort of way, as though now the matter was out of his hands. But Wes Bide never took his outraged eyes off Lee, so Desmond looked back at Lee too and said, "Can't it wait till morning?"

"No."

Wes Bide said, "You're talking big all of a sudden, aren't you?"

Lee turned on him. He said, "You wondering what happened to Red and the others, Wes?" Wes Bide said nothing. "I'll tell you just the same," Lee went on. "Red's up in the hills with three bullets in him, and the other two are ready to collect their wages."

He took one step toward Wes Bide. "Turcott had me burned out, Wes. Now Hatchet's finished and you're gonna be out of a job." He looked along the line of Hatchet riders. "So are the rest of you, and you'd better haul

tail out of the country, unless you want a fight on your hands." He jerked his head at Desmond. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later, the signed warrant in his hand, Desmond led the way into the hotel lobby.

Outside, some holding torches aloft, men crowded around the veranda and waited in silence. Most of the Hatchet riders, Lee had been told, had left town.

Now Desmond asked his question of the clerk, who said, "Ed Turcott went out a few minutes ago, Marshal. I don't know where he went."

LEE thought, Somebody got word to him while we were filling out that warrant, and saw a look of relief come over the marshal's face.

"I'll have to hold this till tomorrow, Lee," the marshal said.

Lee said nothing, sensing that Turcott was somewhere in town.

Desmond watched him. "He won't run, Lee."

"No, he won't."

"He'll fight it, whatever it is. So I might as well go back and finish my pool game."

He turned, went out, and spoke to someone on the veranda. Lee stood at the desk a little while, his head lowered. Then he roused slowly and said to the clerk, "Do you know if Ken's upstairs?"

"He and his wife've been up there almost all evening. They're in 212."

Lee went up and knocked on their door. Ken opened and stepped aside for Lee to enter, a stubborn, somehow pleased, little smile around his mouth. From a chair by the bed Cora looked at Lee in a demure sort of way, and then she too smiled.

"Where've you been?" Ken said.

"Riding." Lee gave a short account of what had happened. "So there's nothing left but the land and the cattle. Clothes, furniture, everything's ashes. And you can forget about Turcott buying you out."

Ken shrugged and said nothing.

Lee turned to the door. "We'll talk about it tomorrow and see what we can figure out. Good night."

"See you, Lee," Ken said, and Lee opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

He had taken no more than a dozen steps when the voice behind him said in a soft high tone, "Hold it right there, Madigan."

It was Ed Turcott's voice, and it came from the rear of the hall.

Lee murmured, "You're finished, Ed," and threw himself sideways and down toward a potted plant, drawing at the same time.

The silence exploded with a roar, and he felt the slug tug at his clothing as he half turned and lifted his gun. In that split second he had a picture of Turcott standing with feet braced in the middle of the hall, the wild grin on his face. Then, before either man could fire again, the door to Ken's room burst open.

Ken, gun in hand, took one look and said harshly, "Hold it, Ed."

Ed Turcott laughed. He said, "Why, you poor fool—" and stiffened his gun hand to shoot. But Ken shot first. The slug made a muffled thud as it struck Turcott in the chest. He pitched forward on his face, rolled over on his back and became still.

LATER, at Rita's, Lee told her about it. "I don't know if it's going to work out, but it looks like Ken can handle her.

"Did you see what happened out there after the shooting?" Lee added. "A bunch of those farmers got a rope and a team and pulled old Evan Turcott's statue down."

She ran her fingers through his hair. "Do you suppose we could give Joe Turkin a job, honey?"

"I've been thinking about that." Then he stared at her. "We?"

"Shake hands with your new partner."

"What?"

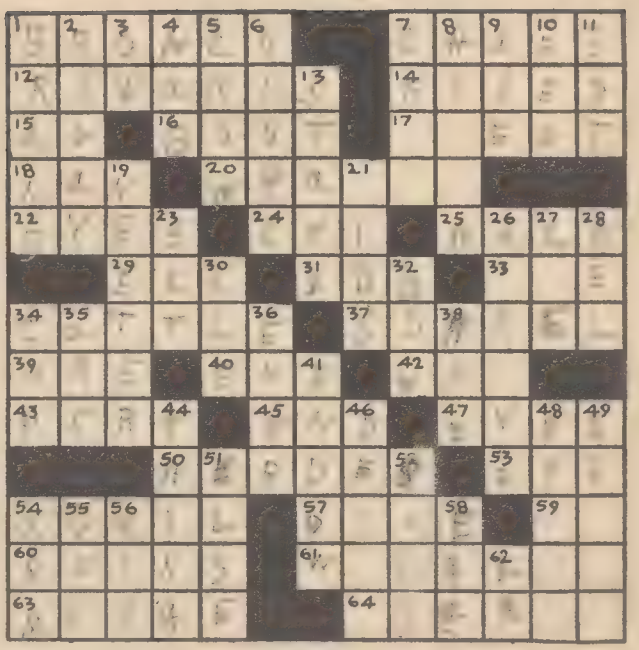
"Well," she said, suddenly demure, "we couldn't let Ken sell out to Turcott, could we? So I went to see him after you told me, and since the bank was still open—"

"What about the saloon?"

"Oh, I just took that over to show myself that I could do it," she said. "But it isn't really what I want, is it?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned." Lee grinned, and took her in his arms. "Not by a long shot."

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Rodeo horse
7. Cowboy garment
12. Sums offered for return of lost articles
14. Wild West show
15. Alfred's nickname
16. Cowboy's shoe
17. Concerning
18. Girl's nickname
20. Cowboy
22. Colors permanently
24. Snow runner
25. Speed contest
29. Ocean
31. To recede, as tides
33. To regret
34. Rancher's animals
37. Reddish-brown horse
39. Raw metal
40. Night before Xmas
42. To court
43. Saucy
45. Finish
47. Organs of sight
50. Gathered together, as cattle
53. Cereal grain
54. Benefit
57. Wood-wind instrument
59. Therefore
60. Bridle straps
61. Horse wrangler
63. To combine
64. To treat royally

DOWN

1. Owner's mark on cattle
2. Kind of race
3. Ouch!
4. To seize (slang)
5. Black bird
6. Scents
7. Steep, rugged rock
8. Integrity
9. Lemon drink
10. Writing tool
11. Drunkard
13. Gambler's money
19. Western squatter
21. Pen points
23. Collection
26. Western gully
27. Hint
28. Snakelike fish
30. Beer
32. Ribbon knot
34. Policeman (slang)
35. Have being
36. Always
38. Fish eggs
41. To furnish with money
44. An object
46. To exclude
48. Artist's folding stand
49. Shop
51. Otherwise
52. Finished
54. Upper limb
55. The letter V
56. To ventilate
58. Hen fruit
62. Sixth note

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

Girl of the

He plucked the knife from under his shirt

EILEEN TERRY, with brimming milk pail, stood for a moment at the threshhold of the mud-and-log cabin. In the late afternoon sunlight of the winter day she stared down at the valley beyond the fir trees. Someone was coming up that distant woodsland trail—a man, swinging relentlessly on plodding snow shoes. He was weighted with packs on his back, and he carried a rifle.

Eileen let out a little gasp. She put down the pail of milk and ran across the snow-packed yard to where her father and mother were putting in a load of slough hay.

He must have come back to claim his cabin —the abandoned hut in the woods her family had found on their trek West. Her father had liked the spot and had decided to stay, in spite of the evidence that a trapper had established a prior claim by putting up the cabin.

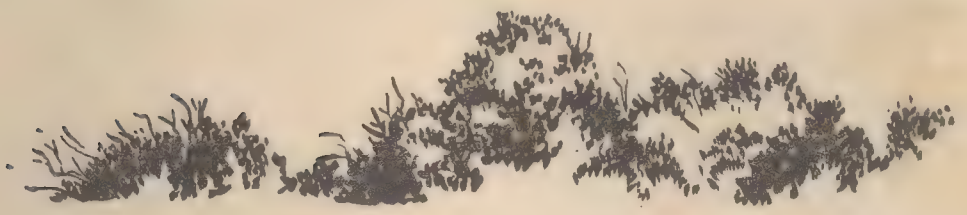
That was two years ago. Martha Terry had always said, "He'll come back, just mark my words. This is too pretty a spot to be left." But John Terry was stubborn, and he had stayed on.

Eileen had been sixteen when her father

Deep Wilderness

By THEODORE J. ROEMER

EILEEN HATED AND FEARED Wing Parness, with his hard, cold eyes . . . but that was before she came to learn how much this strange man was willing to do for the sake of the woman he loved. . . .



had turned his wagon from the train heading for Oregon and had come up this beautiful, heavily-wooded valley of the Black Forks.

"This is good enough for me," he'd said. They were only twenty-odd miles from Jim Bridger's Fort, close enough for protection from the Utes.

"But what about Eileen?" her mother had said. "We can't bury her out here away from everybody. Where will she get a man?"

Red-haired John Terry had laughed and scrubbed his red whiskers with one horny palm. "Don't worry; somebody will come along. Those things always work out."

And Eileen, who had been in the wagon box at the time and unseen, had heard. In the last two years she had watched down that trail, but no man had come—no eligible man, that is. There were Indians, half-breed Shoshones, ancient, broken-down trappers with scraggly teeth and stinking buckskin—but no right, good, eligible young man.

Her mother and father greeted the news of the trapper's coming in silence. Then her mother went in to get supper, while her father hurriedly took care of the team. Eileen went

with her mother. She looked down the valley. The trapper was closer now, but the early October snow was heavy and it would be thirty minutes before he would arrive at the cabin.

Her father was washing up and she and her mother were setting the table when they heard the trapper's mocassined feet on the porch. They heard him stack his snowshoes in the drift away from the eaves, and they heard his two packs eased to the porch floor. Then a hand, without knocking, pushed in the plank door. Eileen held her breath and looked across the table.

He wasn't a big man; in fact, he seemed rather slender. Eileen noticed the fringed buckskin, coonskin cap, belt, mocassins, knife, wild brown hair and intensely black eyes. For a long instant the four people stared at each other. Then the man eased the long rifle before him, his black eyes on John Terry.

"With whose permission, M'sieu?" His voice was soft, with a cold, distant note in it. One hand, made a small motion to indicate the cabin.

"Well, now," John Terry said, "come in and sit down for supper and we'll talk this thing over. Put down your rifle and wash up there. We have venison stew and boiled potatoes and carrots. My name's John Terry." Her father put out his hand.

THE other didn't see it. His eyes were piercing around the room, stabbing at this and that. They momentarily hit at Eileen, then raced on. They came back to John Terry.

"Wing Parness," he said in his soft voice. He walked once around the cabin, looked at the bed where her mother and father slept, at the one-post corner bunk which was her's, then he placed his fine rifle in the corner near the door.

"Yes, I will eat here, and I will sleep here."

The meal was eaten in constrained silence. Even her father was at a loss for words, Eileen noted, at this turn of events. And that was unusual for John Terry. Her mother, small and brown-eyed, was watchful and a little fearful. Eileen, who did all the dishing and serving, felt the man's dark truculence each time she passed near him. So she stayed back.

She tried to judge his age, but couldn't be sure. He might be thirty. Still, sometimes he looked younger, when the firelight caught his lean tanned cheeks. He had quick, powerful fingers, and one hand was trap-scarred. He sat straight on the bench and his black eyes never seemed to miss a movement, especially when her father moved, passing close to the gun above the door to get his pipe. The man was still eating. He ate ravenously, as if it were the first full meal he'd had in some days.

Once her mother ventured, "The venison is good, isn't it?"

He said shortly, "This is buck. A good hunter will pick out a doe."

Eileen felt a burn of anger at his rudeness to their hospitality, but the sight of the hilt of a second knife resting in a buffalo tail sheath inside the buckskin jacket at the back of his neck brought a chill to her. This was a fighting man, and he was well armed. She watched this dark lithe man, and she began to hate him. He had thrust himself upon them; he would force them from their home.

Her father filled his pipe, offered tobacco to Wing Parness. Parness refused with a shake of his head, and brought out his own. Eileen followed her mother into the lean-to where they stored the larger cooking kettles.

"What'll we do, mother? He says he's going to sleep here?"

"I don't know. I just wish your father had built our own cabin. It would have taken only a few weeks' extra time."

They went back into the main room, and Eileen saw the man's eyes sharp upon them, as if watchful for anything. She gripped the dish towel in her slender fingers. Maybe if they—if she were a little more friendly, took the lead toward him, things might work out better.

She hadn't seen half-a-dozen men in the past two years, but she recalled that when they had been in the train rolling toward Oregon all the young men had looked at her with more than passing interest. And she'd been but sixteen then. Now she was eighteen.

With her left hand she smoothed her glossy brown hair back and, facing away, straightened the blouse of her homespun dress

so as to set off her well-rounded figure. Then she continued drying the dishes, waiting for her opportunity to face him when he was looking toward her and the firelight.

HIS dark eyes glanced dartingly as a pine knot tumbled in the fire. Eileen half turned and, though she hated herself for it, she made herself smile at him openly. Her eyes met his.

For an instant the pipe became motionless in his teeth. The body of the man sat still as an Indian, looking across that small room through the blueness of the tobacco smoke at her. She felt the silence, but she continued smiling. After all, wasn't he merely a man? And her mother could wrap her father around her finger at certain times. Wasn't that the way with all men?

And then shock hit her. The dark intensity of his eyes didn't change. They continued to look at her, as the man took a measured draw at his pipe, but the cold hardness remained on his face. Then he looked with his implacable eyes back at her father, and she felt hot blood rush into her cheeks. Her face, burned with anger, with shame. She had laid herself open, and he had disdained her.

In the short while after supper her father tried to make conversation several times, but the man would not be drawn into it. Once her father said, "I only picked this spot because of the falls. Hope to make a grist mill there some day. But there's a better spot for farming directly across the river—much more open land." But Wing Parness merely smoked his pipe.

Her father mentioned several other likely spots for building a cabin, even offered to help build it, but the swarthy trapper blew out smoke from his thin, hard lips and said nothing.

The fire-glow dulled and the candle wick in the hollowed gourd sputtered in the goose fat. The man knocked the dottle from his pipe, arose, brought in his two packs, dropped them in the corner. He took his rifle and two blankets went up the ladder and through the old loft door.

Almost instantly he was silent, as if he'd rolled into the blankets and was at once asleep. Her father glanced once at the left-open loft door, then shrugged. He barred the cabin door and silently made ready for bed.

Eileen was the last to undress. The candle was out, but the flicker from the fire shot ruddy shadows about the room, and she felt self-conscious for the first time in her life. What did he think of her? Was he even now peering down, unseen, from that black hole above?

She slid quickly beneath the rough quilts. The downy feather tick enveloped her body, and almost at once she was warm. But she didn't fall asleep. She stared up and across the room at that loft hole. And her last thought before sleep came was, what did he think of her, smiling so invitingly to him.

EILEEN awakened. She lay still. It was gray dawn, but in the cabin it was yet dark. Early December chill was all through the room now that the fire was out. What had awakened her?

And then she saw the movement. It was Wing Parness, rock-still at the barred door. He was half bent over, listening; she saw the rifle in his hand. How had he ever come down the ladder and moved across to the door without making any sound? For he wasn't moving, hardly breathing, it seemed. It was something outside that had awakened her. She dimly recalled, as in a dream, footsteps on the porch —cat-like, stealthy, moccassined footsteps.

She breathed very quietly in her deep, downy bed and, after a long while, when the light grew stronger through the single window, she saw him leave his post. He put his rifle on the table and sat down, his chin resting on his hands, his elbows on the plank table. She couldn't tell if he were looking at her or at the nearby fireplace.

Her father was astounded when, on awakening, he saw Wing there.

The man said shortly, "Two Utes. At Bridger I heard they were prowling the Green."

Her father said, "We never had any trouble with them. Friendly Shoshones were about all that ever showed up. Dang, I wish I still had my dog Shep. Lost him to a wolf the first month I got up here."

"More likely the Indians took him. Dog is their favorite meat." Wing went outside. Eileen saw him disappear like a wraith in the blue-black of the early-morning forest. Then cold and stillness fastened over the little clearing. Eileen helped her mother get breakfast while her father went out to care for the team and the two cows.

They were sitting down to breakfast when the trapper appeared. He carefully stacked his rifle in the corner, washed at the basin, then without a word sat down at the table.

Eileen felt her anger swelling. What if he had owned this cabin? He had no right to be an uninvited guest at every meal without even so much as a by-your-leave.

But when she lifted her eyes to look down the table at him her anger faded, and a small fear came back to her. His dark aloofness, the very strength of his intense eyes made her withdraw into herself.

Twice her father attempted to make conversation about building a second cabin for Wing, at any site he chose, but the trapper held his aloof silence. Only after he'd finished eating, put on his buckskin jacket, and taken up his rifle, did he speak.

"Utes always mean trouble." With this cryptic saying he went out, disappearing into the forest silently.

Eileen was finishing the milking when she thought she heard a step. Her father and mother had left with the crude bob-sleb to haul the rest of the stack of slough hay up to the barn—they always had to wait for snow and frozen ground to get it out of the slough—and she didn't think they'd be back so soon. Maybe it was that soft-footed trapper.

She started to get up from the milk stool, then grew motionless. A huge Indian stood at the rear of the cow stall.

HER fright burst from her throat in one long scream, and the sound released her into action. Without thinking, she scooped up the milk stool and flung it at the Indian's half-shaven head. Then, gathering her gray skirt, she leaped over the cow's hay manger and fled for the side door.

But a dirty, coppery claw reached out from the horse stall and grabbed her arm. Another Indian appeared in the side door. The huge buck closed in on her from behind. She fought and screamed, but the swarthy men overpowered her with ease. The first Indian carried her outside, grunting something that might have been orders, but sounded more like short, gutteral barks.

Eileen thought at first that she was going to faint. The Indian held her with tight, hurting hands. He stank, and the grease from his face rubbed off on her dress and hair. His nose was hawked and he had a long scar down his right cheek bone.

Outside she screamed again, as loud as she could, thinking to warn her parents, but the Indian clamped a big hand over her mouth. She tried to bite the hand, but it was too tough. Then the Indian flung her to two others, and ran, shouting, toward the cabin.

She saw Indians carrying out blankets, food and kitchen kettles. A bright spear of flame came up from the hay back of the horse barn. Then she saw two more Indians appear from the forest, whooping and driving the two steaming bob-sled horses. She thought of her father and mother. Then she did faint.

When she returned to consciousness she found herself tied onto her father's gray horse. Before and behind her were stacked and tied everything the Indians could cart away from the cabin, and ahead of her she saw the bay horse similarly loaded.

An Indian treading nearby saw Eileen lift her head and shouted to the leader, who came swiftly back and loosened the buckskin things that held her onto the horse. He grunted and looked at her in such a way that she recoiled.

They camped at noon, rode on, then camped for night. The Indians threw Eileen a couple of blankets and a piece of half raw meat, which she didn't touch. She rolled into the blankets away from them, watchful, but none paid her any attention, not even the big buck. There were nine of them, but most seemed to be away scouting during part of that night. The next morning, before dawn, they headed southwest, over the divide once more.

The following night the big leader came to her, but she showed such fury that he stood back and just stared at her, as if pleased

at her display of temper. When he was gone, she clutched the blankets around her tightly and cried in the cold darkness.

The next morning she had to eat the food they offered her—she was famished—but the only thing she relished was a piece of the cheese they had stolen from her cabin.

That forenoon they came to streams once more, swift little rivers that were not yet frozen, and on the banks of a larger one they camped, in a grove of snow-laden fir. There

were seven Indians at the camp, and two others, one of them the leader, were out scouting.

Eileen was gnawing at a bone of venison which they'd thrown her, when suddenly, like an apparition, Wing Parness appeared from between the trees on the river side.

Eileen saw him the instant the Indians did. She started to leap up, then stifled the cry that came to her lips. The seven Indians, faced him, hands on weapons. But he came steadily onward.

WING PARNESS stopped a dozen paces away. He raised his mittened right hand and spoke, and Eileen stared in surprise. He was speaking the Ute tongue. The Indians also stared. Then one cried out something, and all dropped their weapons and stood up. Eileen saw that they recognized Wing.

He came into the camp, not giving her a look. He solemnly shook hands all around, looked at the stolen gear, saw that some of it was his own. But his expression didn't change. He addressed the man who had first recognized him, and for the first time he pointed to her and began talking.

At the start they wouldn't listen. They grunted and shook their heads. The trapper's voice became more urgent. He pointed back into the woods touching his rifle, then his powder horn and bullet pouch. He lifted the rifle and extended it to the camp leader, still gesturing back into the woods. And finally Eileen understood what was going on.

Wing Parness had been telling the Indians that he had made a deal with the absent leader, back in the woods, to trade her for his fine rifle, bullet pouch and powder horn. But the camp Indians were reluctant to go through with the bargain in the absence of their chief.

Finally, with a grandiloquent speech, Wing Parness unstrapped his heavy, leather-hilted Green River knife, and extended it, belt and all, to the Indian with whom he was dickering.

The man's eyes fastened greedily on the coveted knife. Then he reached out his hand. Some of the other Indians barked dissenting voices, but he silenced them with his own harsh words, and motioned the girl to be brought forward.

Clutching a blanket about her shoulders, her gray, bedraggled skirt sweeping the snow, Eileen moved over before Wing Parness. He shook hands solemly around once more, then, almost gruffly, shoved her toward the woods.

She was so overcome by emotion that she felt no anger at it. He was taking her from the Indians. How he had found her, where they were going, she didn't know, but her heart was pounding with incredible relief. Anything was better than the fate she had

expected to face. At least Wing Parness was white and civilized.

The snow-laded fir trees closed behind them. The trapper sprang forward and seized her by the hand. "Lift your dress and run. We've maybe only got a few minutes before the leader, Brown Bear, gets back."

She lifted her skirts and, with the aid of his strong hand, almost flew in the soft snow beneath the towering trees.

"Where are we going?" she gasped.

"I've got a canoe down here."

"Then you didn't make a deal with the big Indian?" She clung to his strong hand, oddly thrilled at the power of those lean fingers.

"No, of course not. Bear would never let you go."

"But—your gun! Your powder and knife!"

"They'd never have let you go without big presents."

The pace he set was furious, and after a short while she was so exhausted that she began to stumble and fall at each stick or stone her feet encountered.

Finally she sobbed, "I—I can't go on."

FOR answer he swept her into his arms and continued running. He ran as if she weighed nothing. She was silent, clinging to his neck, till his breath began to be a bit labored.

Then she said, "You can let me down now. I'll run awhile—" The words froze in her throat.

Brown Bear and another Indian stood before them in the trail.

She seemed to explode from Wing Parness's arms. Whether he had flung her or whether she had disengaged her arms and leaped away, she really didn't know—everything happened so fast. There was no time for words or plan of action; the story was in the big Indian's baleful eyes.

Then Wing Parness was driving in, his lean fingers plucking the long blade from the buffalo-tail sheath beneath his shirt at the back of his neck. The cougar-like spring took Brown Bear aback. He whipped down his tomahawk with lightning speed, all his muscles alive with swift action, but Parness was inside the blow. The knife cut flesh, ripped, thrust. Eileen gritted her teeth at the scream. Then she saw the other Indian leaping in, tomahawk swinging.

Parness hadn't escaped altogether from Brown Bear's blow. The handle had caught him alongside the head, knocking off his fur cap. He tried to dodge the other's strike, but caught it on his forearm. Then he went down, and the Indian closed in with a knife.

Eileen, moving instinctively, grabbed up the fallen Indian's tomahawk and swung it at the half-shaven head of the Ute.

Then it was all over. She stood, gasping, above the three men lying in the snow. The two Indians were quite dead, she knew. About the trapper she wasn't sure; he had taken two severe strikes and a knife wound. That scream, she knew, would bring the other Indians from their camp, which wasn't over quarter of a mile away. Helpless, she started about. What could she do?

The black waters of a small mountain river showed through the trees. She recalled that Parness had said something about a canoe. Maybe it was still there.

She ran to the edge of the bank. The canoe was there, drawn up on the snow banks, the black waters sliding fast beneath its prow. Eileen hesitated only the barest of seconds, then ran back, grasped the unconscious Wing Parness by the shoulders, and, by tugging and pulling, got him to the river bank. Indian yells were sounding back in the forest. She lifted with all her strength, and got his shoulders into the canoe. Then she rolled in his legs.

The yells were coming closer. She braced her back and shoved at the craft. It slid easily off the snow and splashed into the water, and Eileen crawled over the gunwale as the fast-pouring stream carried her into the darkness of the firs.

She heard the howls as the Indians discovered their two fellow Utes, then their cries of rage as they read the story of her escape on the river bank. She wondered how far she had drifted. She looked around for a paddle, but there was none. Probably it had been left behind, or broken by Brown Bear.

She looked at the silent woods racing by on either side. The snow was heavy in

there. The Indians could not hope to catch her on foot, she thought, unless they knew some short cuts through the woods. Then new fears arose in her. A dull, steady roar sounded ahead. A waterfall!

THE river was beginning to race. Eileen could think of only one thing to do. Seeing a low overhanging branch on the right bank ahead, she put her feet into the water over the gunwale and kicked them hard, turning the canoe somewhat. Then she knelt upright, reaching out as far as she could. But her fingers only grazed the tip of the overhanging branch. Then the river had the canoe, and the black forest was racing past.

She knelt rigid in the stern, her hands gripping the gunwales, the unconscious man lying flat in the bottom of the boat. She saw it was not a water fall that faced her, but something twice as terrifying—jagged rock-strewn rapids of foaming white water. And now she was into it.

Rocks scraped the flimsy sides, water sprayed over the bow. She was bounced and jostled. Her toy craft was flung around, went down backward, then once more tossed. She was wet to the skin, and water sloshed in the bottom of the canoe around Wing Parness. But the cold water didn't bring him around, and the canoe shot into a second series of rapids, worse than the first. Eileen crouched, teeth chattering, trying to balance the canoe.

And then it was over and the canoe moved along in the swift, smooth water. After a while Eileen took off her heavy skirt and soaked up the water with it to get the canoe dry. She looked at the man in the craft with her. Blood leaked from his right shoulder and his arm, under the buckskin, looked crumpled. Daylight was waning, and she had to find some shelter for the night. They had only one blanket between them.

They passed several heavy deadfalls in which she thought they might spend the night, but decided they would be little protection. And she wanted to build a fire, if she could.

The canoe drifted on, and Eileen noted that the banks became higher and were of limestone. She watched closely and soon found what she was looking for—a cave.

That night, with the canoe drawn in to reflect the campfire heat, and the single blanket drawn over to form a half-tent, she set the unconscious man's arm as best she could and dressed the knife wound with strips of her underclothing. The fire was the result of flint and steel found in his possible sack, but there was no food. Eileen was weak from hunger. She tried to sleep but sleep wouldn't come.

He moved and muttered half the night, apparently delirious. He was a boy at Fort Qu'Appelle once more. He was playing with a brother named Pierre. His father, factor at Qu'Appelle, was showing him how to set a trap for mink. He said a prayer in French, adding *elle serait aimee*. She knew it meant, "she will be loved."

Eileen sat up and in the flickering light of her small, hand-fed fire she looked down at his face. With the tenseness of his waking life gone from it, it was a youthful face, and she knew he wasn't over twenty-two

[*Turn page*]

Work, Sleep, Play In Comfort ...Without Nagging Backache!

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years of age. She felt his forehead, but he had no fever. The blow of the tomahawk handle must have caused a concussion, but maybe he would come out of it.

She fed the small fire some more twigs from her meager supply. The cold crept under the tented blanket, but the new fire dispelled the chill momentarily. She looked once more at the man's strong, unshaven face. He was handsome, she thought, with his strong nose, the fine dark hair, the clean cut to his jaw.

She knew that at dawn she'd have to do something. But what? She was lost, and they were probably a hundred miles from the nearest trapper or frontier cabin. She had no gun, no knife, no food—just a canoe and one blanket. The cold crept in again, and once more she fed the fire.

WHEN she turned back, she was startled. His eyes were open. It was like suddenly finding someone else in the same room with you, when you thought you were alone. For a long moment she looked into his dark eyes, wondering if full consciousness had returned, before she spoke.

"Hello."

The dark eyes regarded her unwinkingly. No expression played across them.

"Don't move. I've bandaged your shoulder. You've got a broken arm also," Eileen said.

His eyes moved down to his arm and he saw the stick splints and the wadded roll of torn blanket on each side. Then he looked at her, his eyes taking in every detail—her torn skirt, her fingers bleeding—from gathering twigs for the fire—her hair knotted back by a white strip from her underskirt.

Then he said, "Where are we?"

She told him as best she could.

"How far since we shot the rapids?"

"We floated maybe an hour."

"Did you pass a small island?"

"No."

"McNary's abandoned cabin should be two-three miles downstream," he said slowly. "I cached some food there. A few days there and we'll be able to cross the divide and follow the Black Forks down to your home. The Utes will have pulled out by then."

Her heart contracted at the mention of her home. She hadn't let her thoughts dwell on what must have happened to her father and mother.

He must have seen the pain in her face, for he said, "They are alive. I got to them just before the Utes came. They hid in the slough. When I got to the cabin, the Utes had already fired everything and taken you." He stopped. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "But the cabin didn't burn. It didn't catch, and I put out the smoulder with snow."

Kneeling beside him, she looked down into his dark eyes. Wind moaned in the black firs outside and caused a draft in the cave. The blanket wavered, and the firelight flickered against the reflecting interior of the half-tilted canoe.

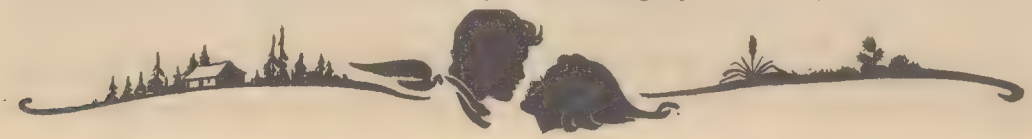
This man, this wild, lonely man of the trapping trails, had done all this for her, had risked his life, had followed the Utes, had traded his precious rifle—

His dark eyes were upon her face, watching every line, every fleeting emotion, the tremble of her lips. He said, even-voiced, "You smiled at me once in your father's house. I figured then that you didn't mean it—you wanted something from me. You are smiling now. Do you mean it now?"

Mean it? She bent slowly to him, and the tears came. She felt his one good arm creep up around her shoulder, drawing her close. The strangeness, the fear, the trembling were suddenly gone from her young body. A new trembling, delicious and warm, took its place.

As she felt Wing Parness's bearded lips on hers for the first time, she remembered her father's words.

"Don't worry about Eileen, mother. Somebody will come along. Those things always work out." She smiled, and returned Wing's kisses eagerly.



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The Fighting

by WILL COOK

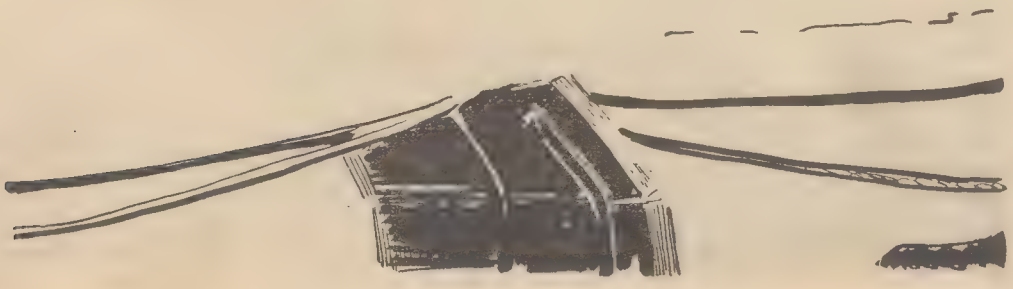
THEY CALLED Jim Quartermain a coward for running away . . . not knowing he was heading for a bigger fight, with higher stakes

PART ONE

RIVER STREET ran north and south through Crystal City and, during the hours of darkness, Jim Quartermain walked this street alone, meeting its violence with violence, presenting a stubborn-willed front of law to the lawless. Quartermain was not a big man, or a loud one, but he got his way with the never-ending small pressures he brought to bear against the toughness of the town.

Every evening at seven he would emerge from the hotel, in a dark suit and a high-crowned hat. Every morning at seven, when his nightly patrol was finished, he would have coffee and sausages at Donegan's resturant, saddle his horse, and ride from town. His ranch lay in a valley three miles from Crystal City. Trees lined the wagon road leading to it and, within the nine hundred and sixty acres embraced by fence, sat a white, two story house, vacant except for his daily visits.

Pausing by the hitchrack near the front porch, Jim Quartermain sat his saddle and looked around for a moment before dismounting. Tying his horse he went inside and



Texan

closed the screen door softly behind him. This was summer. The ripe flavors of hot earth were in the air, and a bluejay called from the elms shading the west side of the house.

The interior was neatly in order. Curtains hung over the windows and book-lined shelves bracketed the fireplace. Settling in a soft chair, Jim Quartermain extracted a cigar from a glass humidor and spent several careful minutes preparing it for the match.

There were these hints of the perfectionist in Jim Quartermain's manner. He wasted no motion, simply because he never moved until he was certain that movement would produce the desired results. Methodically he attempted to remove all improbables from the equations of his life.

He was a young man, twenty-seven, but surprisingly serious. As a rule he did not laugh often, although there was nothing surly about him. Neither was he a sad man. Rather, Quartermain was fine-drawn by the guarded habits of his life.

On the small table by his chair was a mahogany box, fat at the base and tapering toward the top. A small door was hinged and hooked on the face, and a winding key protruded from the back. Leaning forward in his chair, Quartermain opened the front and pulled out the raised and weighted wand. When he wound the mechanism the wand ticked back and forth in measured cadence. By raising and lowering the metronome weight, he could slow or speed up the beat.

Leaving his chair, he crossed to a closed desk in the corner and slid back the roll top. A gun and holster lay there, and he buckled the belt around his waist and settled the gun on his hip. After spinning the cylinder to make sure the gun was empty, he placed it in the holster and timed himself with the metronome.

He drew on a mental impulse, and rapidly produced a series of dry clicks by fanning the hammer. Then he slid the weight down on the wand, increased the speed slightly, and repeated the process of fanning.

Ben Bickerstaff, the Texas gunfighter, had taught him to do this. The musician's metronome was originally set for sixty beats a minute. If a man could draw in the space between beats, he was getting his gun in action in one second. Bickerstaff could do better than that, and Quartermain was at the point where he could start the metronome at one hundred and twenty beats a minute and still have time to spare. Under ideal conditions, when he was standing properly and facing the target, Quartermain found that he often drew in a quarter of a second.

I'm almost as good as Lee was, he decided, and went on practicing.

AFTER an hour of this, he left the house and crossed the yard to the barn. Along the west wall a bunker had been erected out of old railroad ties. Cracked beer mugs and empty whisky bottles were stacked to one side.

With his gun loaded, Jim Quartermain picked up a beer mug, tossed it high, and drew. He followed it for a brief second as he sighted; then the gun bucked and the glass slivered in a bright spray. Taking two mugs with his left hand, he tossed them together, drawing the .44-40 as they separated. He fired when they were high, shattering the first one, then cocked quickly and caught the other three feet off the ground.

Replacing the spent shells, he stood in the strong sunlight and looked at the gun in his hand. The 1875 Remington had been reworked by a clever gunsmith. The seven and a half inch barrel had been shortened by two inches, until it came to the end of the ejector rod web. The hammer had been flattened where the thumb gripped it, and the trigger was drilled and fastened back against the guard with a machine screw. This was the weapon of a gunfighter—fast, balanced, reliable.

After breaking a dozen more bottles, Jim Quartermain walked back to the house and spent twenty minutes cleaning his pistol. When all trace of powder had been removed, he put it back in the desk and rolled the top down. From the road the distinct rattle of a buggy drew nearer, and he went outside to the porch.

The buggy wheeled into the yard and Quartermain stepped down, smiling now. He helped a young woman to the ground, while she raised both hands to reseat her wide hat.

Quartermain said, "This is a pleasant surprise, Carrie."

He took her arm and they walked to the cool shade of the porch.

Carrie Holderman was tall and somewhat slender at first glance. When she removed her hat, hair fell to her shoulders in a brown cascade. She had a rounded body, and her dress rustled softly as she moved past him to enter the house. She stood for a moment in the hall.

"I never tire of coming here," she said, and moved into the parlor, tossed her hat onto a low stool, then stripped off her gloves. "I seem to feel more at home here than anyplace else." She looked at him quickly. "Is it wrong, Jim, admitting that?"

"Not wrong, Carrie," he said. "Just confusing."

Carrie's eyes were pale and darting, and missed nothing as they flicked over the room. She moved toward his chair and ran her hand across the back, canting her head sideways when she saw the metronome. The spring had unwound and the wand had stopped. She flicked it idly with her finger, and watched it oscillate a moment, then stop.

"Practicing?" She lifted the metronome, closed the cover, and replaced it on the small table. "I heard the shooting on the way from town. Did you miss, Jim?"

"No," he said flatly.

She turned to him, her eyes grave. "Is it so important that you have to shoot every day?"

"Yes," he said. "It seems that I no longer control the gun; it controls me." His seriousness vanished, and he smiled. "Care for some cool beer?"

She nodded. They went into the kitchen, and Quartermain raised the cooler while she took a chair by the table. He poured a full glass for her, then sat down with his own glass in his hand.

"I'm in love with this place," Carrie said, looking around the room. "I've always had the notion you were thinking of a woman when you had this place built, Jim. There've been times when I was jealous of her, for she must have had great influence."

"There was no woman," Quartermain said, and hooked his arm over the chair.

SHE regarded him seriously for a moment. "Then why did you build it?"

"I needed it," Quartermain said. His brows drew down and slight lines appeared around his eyes. "I learned my trade from one of the best, Carrie—Lee of Texas. But I don't want to end up like he did, with a tired horse, a ten-dollar watch, and a used pistol. I've got to have something solid behind me, a purpose for being alive."

"Does the house make the difference?"

He moved his shoulders restlessly. "I think it does. Life's a search for the answers, Carrie. When a man finds them, he's complete. I'm not."

"But what answers are there?" she asked. She reached across the table and put her hand over his. "You're an educated man, Jim. Give up River Street and live here, and you'll find the answers."

"I like your voice," he said softly, smiling now. "Carrie, I'm the King of River Street, but I'm like the kid with the bobcat by the ears; I don't dare let go. Back home in Texas I knew the old bunch, the top guns, and I made the mistake of learning too much from them. I shot a man in the San Saba. Afterward I was sorry, but there was no other way out. Later I had to shoot another man, and then I found out what the others must have known all along—that each time it gets easier. That's what I have to fight, Carrie. I don't want to be like Cullen Baker or Longley."

"Or like Bob Lee?"

"Lee was different," Quartermain said. "But he was so fast that men just had to keep after him. They couldn't leave him alone."

Her hand tightened on his, and her voice was softly pleading. "Like they can't leave you alone. Jim, just give it up. Put the gun down and forget that you ever carried it." She loved him; he could see it in her eyes. "Why do you make me say it all the time? Isn't there anything in your heart for me?"

He withdrew his hand gently. "Don't say it, Carrie. We like each other and we'd better leave it that way."

"Of course," she said, and stood up. Her smile was forced, and this bothered Quartermain, for she was a gay girl.

When she stepped toward the hall door he took her arm and said, "Do you have to go, Carrie?"

"Do you really want me to stay?" She gave him a troubled smile. "Let's not pretend with each other, Jim. Neither of us do it well enough to get by."

He said no more until they reached the buggy. "Carrie, what's the matter with me?"

"I don't think anything is," she said, "only you don't believe that."

A smile broke the solemnity of his face, and his touch on her bare arms was gentle. Her lips changed faintly, becoming more inviting, and he pulled her against him and kissed her. In spite of his self-discipline, his emotions broke through and he became demanding. When he released her, a new smile was curving her lips and a deep pleasure tinted her voice.

She said, "I can wait a while longer now. You've told me what I want to know." Placing his hands on the softness above her rounded hips, he lifted her into the rig. She picked up the reins and said. "You'll come to supper, won't you?"

"Yes," he said, and watched her drive from the yard. When he could no longer see her through the trees flanking the road, he went back into the house.

For an hour Jim Quartermain lay back in his chair, his feet elevated on a stool. With the curtains drawn across the front windows, the dimness made the room somewhat cooler. He slept till a knock rattled the front door. Coming awake instantly, he went to see who it was. The sun was almost vertical now, and the heat was thick. The yard was dry and crusted, and sundogs danced farther down the valley.

JUDGE ENRIGHT came in when Quartermain opened the door. Enright was a portly man, fifty some, with hair shot with gray. His face was florid, a blend of good whisky and the heat.

"Bad news," he said. "Kurt Harlow bailed Slimmie out of jail less than an hour ago."

"Didn't you think he would?" Quartermain asked, waving the judge into a chair.

"Jim," Enright said, "You worry me some times."

Quartermain laughed and rekindled his dead cigar. "Kurt hates to give up, Harry. You know that better than I do."

"Kurt wants you dead," Enright said. "Don't you give a damn?"

"Sure," Quartermain said. "But sometimes I wonder if you do. Or anyone else in Crystal City, for that matter."

"Men hire the law and then wash their hands of it," Enright insisted. "The problem right now is Kurt Harlow and what to do about him. He wants Main as well as River Street in his pocket, and he means to get it."

"Not while I'm city marshal. And he knows that."

The judge sighed heavily and mopped his face with a handkerchief. "You're only one man, Jim; one gun. Kurt has pulled a fast one on you this time, and he'll wait for you tonight."

"I intend to meet him. Are you worried, Harry?"

"Dammit, yes!" Enright snapped. "You called this showdown on Kurt and he accepted it; twenty-four hours to clear out of town. But then he turned right around and gave you twelve to do the same. That twelve hours is up tonight at seven."

Enright leaned forward in his chair. "The toughs that pass through here are getting cautious with you, Jim. You don't miss when you shoot, and it worries them. The odds are getting too steep from the front, so they'll soon start evening them up from the back. That could be why Kurt bailed Slimmie out —to wait in an alley."

"Tonight we'll find out," Quartermain said quietly.

"Slimmie's his odds," Harry Enright insisted. "If you took care of Slimmie first, Kurt would run."

"Harlow can't run," Quartermain said, "because he's talked too big and can't go back on it."

"Is that what keeps you walking River Street? Pride?"

"Maybe. I haven't figured it out yet."

"Let me know when you do," Enright said, and went out into the sunlight. Pausing there, he asked, "You going over to Doc Holderman's for supper?"

"I've been asked," Quartermain admitted.

This was a lucky punch, Jim thought. He wouldn't get in another

"You'd better marry that girl," Enright said, and walked toward his horse.

After the judge left, Quartermain went back into the house and rested for another hour. At two o'clock he mounted and rode slowly back to town.

Moving along River Street at a walk, he pulled up in front of Mammy Krieger's Saloon and dismounted. A swamper was working on the porch, but he halted his sweeping to let Quartermain enter. Inside, the room was cool and dim. The professor was at the piano, his nimble fingers running through a new tune. Behind the bar, Gil Purvis slid change into a canvas sack and drew the strings tightly before chucking it into the safe. From beneath the bar he produced a private bottle and poured the marshal a drink.

"Tonight's the big night," Gil Purvis said softly. "You get any sleep?"

"An hour or so," Quartermain admitted.

"You *are* a fool," Purvis said. "You don't know when to quit, do you? You're twenty-seven. In your business, that's old. Lee wasn't that old when he got it, and he was one of the best."

QUARTERMAIN smiled, and regarded Purvis through squinted eyes. "You worry too much, Gil," he said. "It causes wrinkles and removes the provocative bloom from your cheeks."

"Agh! Jim, did you ever think of going back to Texas?"

Quartermain's face was once more serious. "Many times."

"Why don't we both go back? I mean it. Caldwell's offered me a good price for this deadfall, and the camp's on the die-up anyway." He studied Quartermain carefully and added, "I don't mean we have to go back to the San Saba. There's lots of room in Texas."

Jim shook his head. "Gil, if I went back it would have to be to the home place. But that belongs to Andy and Jane, not to me." He moved his glass in an aimless circle. "After I met Lee and Ben Bickerstaff, too many things changed. I caused the old man enough trouble when I shot Abe Jenner."

Quartermain motioned for Purvis to get himself a glass. After the whisky was poured, he offered a toast. "To Lee of Texas, the Prince of the Pistoleers."

"Dead prince," Purvis amended, and upped his glass. "Lee was no god, Jim. Neither was Ben Bickerstaff. They were just men with magic in their hands, the same kind of magic you have."

"But Lee put it there," Quartermain said. "For better or worse, he put it there."

"A man with only one name," Purvis said. "No home, no family; just a lost man, Jim. Did he teach you that, too?"

"Why blame him? I don't."

"He fixed it so you'll get it like he did, in an alley and in the back." Purvis slapped the bar and looked disgusted. "Jim, I was there. I watched it grow in you and Joel McKitrich until you weren't people any more, just men who could pull a gun and shoot. I knew Lee better than you did, Jim, and toward the last he wasn't happy. He lived in a shadow world where nothing was real to him. You're going to live there too, because he willed you that along with the skill."

Quartermain sighed, and his voice was gentle. "Let me up, Gil; I'm bleeding."

"I'm your friend," Purvis said. "You know that, Jim. Let's get out of here and go home. Forget about Abe Jenner and think of the old man. Izee would want you to come back."

"Too late," Quartemain said, and turned away from the bar. Outside he took a quick look up and down, then led his horse toward Border Street. He retied the horse in front of the doctor's large house and went up the path. The front gate squealed beneath his hand, and Carrie Holderman came to the porch. She kissed him quickly before ushering him into the parlor. Dr. Holderman was reading the paper, but he put it down when Quartermain took a chair. Carrie smiled and went into the kitchen, where she had an apple pie in the oven.

Holderman regarded Quartermain from beneath bushy brows. "Tonight is going to be a bad one, Jim. If you need any help, let me know." He paused, as though a little uncertain of himself. "Jim, we've got together and formed a committee, in case anything happens to you and Kurt tries to take the town over."

"Keep that committee quiet as long as I'm alive," Quartemain said. "I don't like armed mobs, Ranse."

"This is just in case," Holderman said reassuringly. "Just a spare."

CARRIE rattled pots in the kitchen, and Quartermain left Dr. Holderman with his paper and went down the hall. He scraped a chair away from the table and sat down to watch Carrie. She had on a thin cotton dress, and perspiration made dark spots along the back and beneath her arms. It stood out in beads on her forehead and upper lip.

He said, "You shouldn't cook on a day like this. It's a hundred and five in the shade."

She smiled and brushed a strand of hair from her face. "Jim, this is what a woman does best."

She sent him an invitation with her eyes, and he stood up and put his arms around her. She raised her lips for his kiss while her arms went around his neck. Then she pulled her head back, still standing tightly against him.

"Jim, I know you love me. Marry me. Marry me tomorrow—tonight!"

"I couldn't do that," he said gently. "Not being sure, I couldn't."

"Let me be sure for both of us," she urged. "What else matters? Don't you think I love you enough to make you happy? A woman has to make bargains, Jim. I'm willing to make mine now."

"You don't have to make a bargain," he said, glancing at the wall clock. "You're a beautiful girl, Carrie, and you make me think things I have no right to think."

"I want you to think them," she said. She saw his attention drift to the clock again. Freeing herself from his arms, she added, "I've learned to hate clocks. Do you think I ever sleep while you're out there? Every time a gun goes off—"

Quartermain's soft voice pushed hers aside. "I think your pie's burning." He watched her regain control, then went down the hall as she turned and opened the oven door.

Quartemain went to the front porch and sat with his feet cocked up on the railing. Farther down the road was the Union Pacific depot, with the yellow freight shed and the telegrapher's shack behind it. On his left lay the town, quiet now in the daylight hours. But at night it was wild with miners, loud with the blare of a dozen saloons. Crystal City was a different town when the sun died, completely alien from the one the sun shone on.

Quartemain watched the telegrapher leave his small building and walk toward Main Street.

Then the man saw Quartermain's horse, and came up the street. At the steps he said, "Got a message for you, Marshal."

Quartermain ripped it open and read it twice.

JIM
ANDY DEAD STOP JANE AWAY STOP
COME QUICK STOP WILL NOT LAST
THREE MORE DAYS AT MOST STOP
NEED YOU BAD, JIM
IZEE BEAL

The man watched Quartermain, then turned away and went uptown. After he rounded the corner, Quartermain went into the house, his mind frantic as he tried to understand the old man's message. Three days? By his calculations, he'd have to hump to make San Saba in three days. If he left on the 5:09 tonight—

But he couldn't do that! Kurt Harlow was waiting at seven.

By the time he had reached the kitchen, he knew that he had no choice. Taking Carrie by the arm, he said, "Carrie, I've told you about Izee, the man who raised me." He held up the telegram and added, "I've got to go to him—now, in a few minutes. I've got to catch the train for Texas that leaves town at 5:09.

HER eyes were wide. She was trying to understand, but she failed. "But you'll be back, won't you?" She looked past Quartermain as her father came to doorway. "Dad, Jim's going to leave."

"I won't be able to come back to Crystal City," Quartermain said. "Carrie, if I don't face Harlow, the town will think I'm yellow. Can't you see that?"

"Show them the telegram. They'll understand."

"They won't understand," Quartermain said. "Carrie, I can't go around explaining to anyone."

"He's right, Carrie," Ranse Holderman said. "If he leaves now he's through in Crystal City."

She gripped his arm as if to hold him. Quartermain glanced at the wall clock. Three minutes after five.

Far out on the flats a train whistle sounded, long and drawn out.

"Don't go," Carrie pleaded. "Jim, I'd rather see you kill a man than go. Please, Jim."

"I have to go," he said. "Izee would never let me down, Carrie."

"But three days—"

"I'll have a sixty-mile ride when I get off the train," he said. He ignored her father and pulled her to her feet, holding her tightly. "There's no time now, and I find there are many things I want to say to you."

She kissed him, and her father turned away and went into the other room. She used her lips and her body to pull at him, to hold him, but in the end she lost and pulled away.

"Carrie, I'll write to you. I'll send your father a power of attorney so he can sell my place."

The train whistle was louder this time, as it made the long sweep north of town. He turned from her abruptly and ran out the back door. She followed him to the porch as he sprinted toward the depot.

"I'll follow you, Jim. Where ever you go, I'll go there too!"

Her voice faded and he ran on, pausing at the ticket window. He pulled a twenty-dollar gold piece from his pocket. "One way to Brownwood, Texas."

The agent looked up sharply. He wrote on

a ticket blank, then said, "Fourteen dollars even, Marshal."

Quartermain pocketed his change and went out on the platform to wait. The train was still three miles out, the plume of smoke rising and blowing in a long streamer behind the engine.

The agent came out and said, "You leaving town, Marshal?"

"That's right."

"What about Harlow?"

Quartermain gave the man a level stare and said, "You got a gun?" The man nodded. "Then go shoot him yourself," Quartermain advised.

The telegrapher's key rattled noisily, but there was no one to answer it. Jim Quartermain knew that the man was uptown, repeating the contents of the telegram to anyone who would listen. He turned and watched the train pull nearer.

He had no luggage, not even his gun. He mentally counted the money on him; ninety dollars, enough for a horse and gear in Brownwood.

Quartermain walked up and down the cinder platform, now and then glancing toward Main Street. He recognized Kurt Harlow and Slimmie while they were still too far away to distinguish any definite feature. Harlow was walking rapidly toward the depot and there were a dozen men behind him, with more gathering as they came on.

This will be a good show, Quartermain thought, immediately regretting that he did not have his gun so he could finish the job.

The train pulled into the depot. Harlow and Slimmie came up, the onlookers fanned out behind them. Harlow was tall and handsome in a blond way. His suit was fashionable, and he wore a diamond stickpin in his Ascot tie. Around his waist and over his coat, he wore his pistol.

"Well, well," he said, smiling thinly. "Quartermain, I thought you had more guts."

SLIMMIE crossed his arms and waited, grinning. He was a skinny man who made his living with a gun, which he wore on his left hip in a crossdraw holster. Quartermain stepped onto the platform as the train stopped. Ahead, the engine puffed and exhaled steam, while the brakie and the conductor chatted, oblivious to the mounting tension on the platform.

Quartermain remained on the bottom step, one hand gripping the handrail. Harlow said, "We could finish it now."

"No gun," Quartermain said, and watched them.

"No gun?" Harlow laughed. "That's playing it safe, isn't it?" He swept the crowd with his eyes. "I heard about the telegram, Jim, but I couldn't believe it."

"Don't get big," Quartermain told him. "I can come back."

"You won't come back!" Harlow snapped. "Keep on running, tin star. This town's dead to you. Come back and there'll be a bullet waiting for you."

The engineer applied steam and the train lurched ahead, moving slowly. Jim Quartermain remained on the bottom step, and Harlow and half a hundred townsmen paced the train to the end of the platform, jeering and laughing. When Quartermain's coach pulled by, Harlow drew his gun and shot repeatedly into the air, like a cowboy hoorawing a town. Then the train was out of the station, and Quartermain entered the coach and found a seat. Within him churned a wild anger. If he had had his gun he would have jumped off and killed Harlow.

The knowledge that he could hate that strongly was a knife in him. He realized then that he had reached a transition point, one that he had always feared. Ben Bickerstaff had reached it, as had Bob Lee. After that they killed on the slightest provocation.

He forced himself to relax in the hard seat, staring blindly at the landscape moving past the window. At Canyon City he transferred to the southbound Sante Fe. Through the early part of the evening he slept, but he dreamed of Izee Beal and the half-wild Andy. When he woke, he carried the dreams forward with his conscious thoughts.

Jane would be twenty now, and he wondered if she had meant it that time when she had said she loved him. He supposed not, for at fifteen a girl is experimenting, not yet able to take true inventory of her emotions.

He smiled, for he recalled how emotional

Jane was, how alive and aware she could be. What are you worrying about? he asked himself. She's not going to point a shotgun at you and demand that you redeem a childish honor.

The train rattled on into the night and the bang of couplings, the clatter of trucks over the rail joints, lulled him. The kerosene lamps threw a yellow glow over the interior of the coach, and the door behind Quartermain opened. He heard the momentary increase in sound and felt the breeze.

The man came down the aisle from behind and suddenly swung into the seat facing Quartermain. Slimmie said, "Enjoying your ride, yellow belly?" His hands were folded casually across his chest, the fingertips scant inches from his gun.

Two seats ahead of Quartermain, three men sat in a close-packed group, talking quietly. At Slimmie's loud words they looked up, their attention sharp.

"Get away from me," Quartermain said.

"You got no gun now," Slimmie pointed out, and smiled. "I've always wanted to catch you like this." He leaned back, his eyes bold and mocking. "You rode the white horse too long. The great big man, pushing people around—pushing me around. Now I can push you."

He raised his booted foot and wiped the sole on Quartermain's dark trousers, leaving a dirty smudge. The men two seats ahead were watching intently now, their eyes narrowed.

Slimmie laughed. "You're a wind-broke horse, Quartermain. I always knew that gun made you big." He leaned forward and whipped his palm across Jim Quartermain's face, at the same time plunging his hand toward his gun. Slimmie had had it all figured out before he moved. No man would take a slap in the face. By reaching as he struck out, Slimmie had the edge.

QUARTERMAIN did not move, and surprise washed into the man's eyes. His hand relaxed on his gun and he said, "What's the matt—"

Then Quartermain hit him. Jack-knifing his legs, Quartermain drove both feet into Slimmie's gun hand with enough force to propel him backward to the coach floor. Slimmie hit and grunted, at the same time making an awkward grab for his gun with his left hand.

Leading with his knees, Quartermain went over the seat and landed on Slimmie's chest. The man screamed in pain. Heads came around, and women gasped. The three men in the seats ahead laughed.

Dragging Slimmie to his feet, Quartermain hit him, an axing punch that flattened him full length in the aisle. Bending over him, Jim Quartermain removed the gunbelt and buckled it on, sliding the holster around on his right hip. The conductor hurried forward as Quartermain lifted Slimmie and carried him to the platform between the coaches.

"He gets sick on trains," Quartermain lifted Slimmie and carried him to the platform between the coaches.

"He gets sick on trains," Quartermain said, and shoved Slimmie off to the roadbed. Quartermain turned and walked back to his seat. As he passed the three men, one said, "That's playing rough, friend."

"I didn't make the rules," Quartermain said evenly.

"You going south?" the man asked. He sized Quartermain up while rolling a smoke. "I'm just asking."

"The train's going that way," Quartermain said. "Is it important to you?"

"Only money's important to me," the man said, licking his smoke. He glanced at the two men who sat across from him, then added, "I hear there are good wages to be made in Texas. A feller in the San Saba's paying seventy a month. The way you fight I thought you'd be interested."

"Who in San Saba?"

The man grinned behind drifting cigarette smoke. "I didn't say."

Quartermain nodded and went back to his seat, tipping his hat forward over his eyes. Seventy a month was gun wages. He thought immediately of the Jenners—the four Jenners, kings in the San Saba.

He had personally reduced them to four when he had killed Abe. It was his first killing, and he recalled the deep shock he had felt after the fight.

The rough, womanless Jenners lived alone

and liked it. They were volatile men, who lived within the sphere of their own narrow judgment and expected everyone else to do the same. Fists, a whip, or a gun—that was what a Jenner spoke with.

He could guess the trouble that Izee Beal was in, for he was neighbor to the Jenners on the south. For years they had quarreled, with easy-natured Izee always giving in, merely to keep the peace.

But Jim Quartermain had never been like Izee. He was not as easy going. Bob Lee had taught him that. He recalled how the Jenners had always walked softly around Lee—and hated it. But Lee was the greatest teacher of gunfighters who ever lived, and crossing him involved great risk.

I guess I did Lee's killing for him, Quartermain thought. Abe and I never should have fought, but we did. After that he had left Texas with Lee and Bickerstaff, and the split between the Jenner Long Knife and Izee Beal's Running W had grown very wide.

Across the flats west of El Paso the train picked up speed and pounded along at a steady fifty-five miles an hour. The land was monotonous, and Quartermain caught up with his sleep. That evening he checked into the Abilene station, and left an hour later on the Brownwood stage. The three men on the train were on the same stage, but there was little talk.

NEAR midnight the stage stopped for a change of horses. When the first pale streaks of dawn lightened the eastern sky, the driver dipped the four-up rig off a slight rise toward the clapboard town in the flats below.

The driver rattled down the main drag, braked to a halt in front of the hotel, and threw down the mail pouches. The passengers dismounted, and Quartermain went immediately to the stable for a horse. He woke the hostler, from whom he bought a buckskin and a second-hand saddle. When he led the animal outside, the three men from the train came up.

The brash one said, "I pegged you right on the train. You're after the seventy a month too."

"Maybe," Quartermain said.

"I'm Audie the Kid," the man said. "Maybe you heard of me."

"I never have," Quartermain said, and swung into the saddle. He saw Audie the Kid's eyes turn unpleasant. Then he swung the horse around and rode from town.

He paused at noon to let the buckskin cool, then mounted and pushed on. He forded the Colorado near the old Comanche crossing and emerged dripping on the other side. The summer sun was a furnace, and he dried quickly. Hunger became a clamp on his stomach, but he ignored it. When the buckskin showed signs of wear, Quartermain dismounted and led it for twenty minutes, then mounted again.

The sun died slowly and the heat fell off. He crossed another small river and, later, a creek. The land was familiar now; he knew every dip and rise. Several miles ahead across the flats, lights made points like distant stars, flickering in the clearness of coming night. Suddenly the trot seemed too slow and Quartermain ran the horse until he came to the porch. He went into the house with long strides.

A man came quickly from the parlor. "Jim! I about gave you up."

Cherokee Nye was sixty or more, with a mustache that bobbed when he talked. There was another man in the room and he stood up, offering his hand when Quartermain came into the parlor.

"Hello, Doc." Quartermain said. "How's the old man?"

"You'd better go to him," Oldmeyer said.

Quartermain turned, walking down the hall. He opened Izee Beal's door quietly. There was a lamp burning on the table by the bed, and light flooded the old man's drawn face. Izee turned his head slightly and a smile wrinkled his cheeks. Jim Quartermain threw his hat in the corner and pulled a chair close to the old man's bedside.

"Knew you'd come," Izee said softly. "You'd never let me down, Jim. You'n Andy have been real mavericks, boy, but I always had a fondness for the wild ones."

"Don't talk," Quartermain said. "We'll have time later."

"I've been holding on, just waiting for you, Jim. It's tell you now or never tell you." He

sighed and made a smoothing motion on the covers. "Bushrod Jenner killed Andy. Parker and Forney got me."

"Why?"

"Because I got stubborn. I'm buying shorthorns, Jim, and putting in a barbed wire fence. Rob Jenner objected." He paused to cough. When the spell passed, he went on. "Andy lost his temper and pulled on Bushrod, but the horse shied. The whole thing took me by surprise. The next thing I knew I was down."

"You hit bad?"

"Side and chest," Izee said. "The doc's doped me good; I don't feel anything." His hand came up and touched Quartermain. "Jane's on her way, boy. Save the ranch for her, Jim." A sadness came into his eyes then. "We had ourselves a hassle once, didn't we? I've been sorry about that. The ranch is half yours. You and Jane can put the two halves together, Jim. I'd like to think of it that way."

Quartermain watched this man he had called father for twenty years. Finally he said, "No one's going to take anything away from her, Izee. You have my word for it."

THE old man smiled, and Jim Quartermain went out and into the parlor. The doctor and Cherokee Nye looked up as he stopped in the archway.

"Better go to him, Doc." Quartermain said, and the doctor hurried away. The cook came in with a tray of sandwiches. Quartermain ate.

"You staying?" Cherokee asked.

"Yes."

"Then he'll die happy." The old Texan rolled a smoke and put a light to it. "Joel McKitrich came back three years ago. He's ranching a small place of his own." The old man looked steadily at Quartermain. "I haven't seen him pack a gun since he came back."

"Some men can give it up," Quartermain said. "You think he can?"

"No," Cherokee said flatly. "No more'n Rob Jenner can stand to see fences go up and shorthorns grazing where longhorns used to be. You know that Izee's sold off? It's so. The boys built a holding pasture behind the barn and he's got eighty head of Herefords there, hand feeding 'em to boot."

Quartermain looked searchingly at the man. "You don't think much of the idea?"

"I'm loyal to the brand," the old man said. "Personal opinions don't count."

"I see," Quartermain said, and finished his third sandwich. "The Jenners know I've come back?"

Cherokee shook his head. "Just me'n Cimarron. I guess McKitrich figures you will; he was here yesterday asking about you."

"How many men on the payroll?"

"Nine."

"Not enough."

"It was enough," Cherokee said. He walked to the fireplace and threw his cigarette away. "You doing this for Jane? As I remember, you and her was a little sweet on each other."

"Things will be different now," Quartermain said. "She'll be a grown woman. If I was you I wouldn't embarrass her by mentioning something she's probably forgotten about."

"Sure," Cherokee said, and walked outside. Quartermain touched a match to his cigar and sat in the deep chair, straightening when Doctor Oldmeyer came back into the room.

Oldmeyer threw a bloody cloth into the fireplace and said, "Not more than an hour; two at the most."

WESTERN STYLE

By DICK HAYMAN

Cats and dogs and parrots are
Other peoples' pets;
Wild West cowboys prefer blondes,
Redheads and brunettes.

Oldmeyer was a heavy man, and his face was lined with the troubles of many people. His hands were huge and hairy and very gentle. He accepted one of Quartermain's cigars, along with a match, then said, "I don't know where he gets the heart. He should have died last night. There's not enough blood in him to keep a chicken alive."

"The Beals always had plenty of guts," Quartermain said. He looked at Oldmeyer. "Cherokee said McKitrich is back, that he's quit."

Oldmeyer nodded. "Got a wife and small son." He turned to face Jim Quartermain. "If you're thinking of ringing him in on this fight, get rid of the idea. McKitrich's on the fence and he means to stay there. The Jenners tried to get him on their side, but he said no."

"Rob Jenner could use a gun like McKitrich's," Quartermain said. "We were in Virginia City for awhile, and he's plenty fast."

"Jenner's not hiring guns," Oldmeyer said flatly. "He's talking a lot, but he's the kind that likes to handle his own fights." He paused to puff his cigar. "Seems that your being here will be like a red flag under Rob's nose. They hated Lee because he never bowed to them, and you and Lee were friends. They'll pass that along to you."

"They still remember Abe?"

"Sure," Oldmeyer said. "Jim, it isn't the fight over the fence that worries me, it's what this can to do to a man inside." He tossed his cigar into the fireplace. "I knew Hickok before Abilene and after, and I saw him change, Jim. I saw him sit in corners, against the wall. I heard that he wrinkled paper and put it on the floor at night so that he would have a second's warning in case anyone tried to get him. Living on the thin edge all the time is too much for a man; it gets him. Finally he can't walk past a dark alley or stand in front of a window. It's happened to all of them, Jim, every last one."

"What's the cure?"

"Quit! Just up and quit. When some tough comes along and gives you some sass, take it and forget it." He slapped his leg and added, "Jim, remember that the Jenners aren't eager to fight either. They don't want a fence."

"You think my being here will cause them to fight?"

OLDMEYER'S shoulders rose and fell. "Jim, I don't know. Stay and find out." He went to the hallway and paused. "Jane's coming home from that St. Louis school for girls. She'll be different. The rough edges will be gone."

"You don't knock the rough edges off a Beal that easy," Quartermain said, and the doctor went out to the bunkhouse. When Oldmeyer's footsteps faded, Jim Quartermain went back to Izee Beal's room.

"It's nice this way, Jim," Izee said when Quartermain sat down.

"Try to get some rest, Izee."

"Rest? I'm heading for a long one. Got no regrets." He studied Quartermain with bright and probing eyes. "You haven't changed much. It hasn't had time to leave its mark on you yet. You always were a curious cuss, Jim. You ever figure out all the answers to the questions that bothered you so much?"

"Some of them," Quartermain said. "Some I didn't like."

"It goes that way," Izee said. "Lee used to worry me, the influence he had on you. But I guess it worked out for the best." He touched Jim lightly. "Sorry about this mess I'm handing you, boy."

"It's all right, Izee."

"Yeah, you'd say that." He turned his head slowly toward the lamp. "You mind turning that up? Likely needs kerosene."

Jim Quartermain straightened, then said gently, "The lamp's all right, Izee."

"Huh?" Then awareness came to the old man, and he relaxed. He lay with his eyes open, breathing evenly, his lined face composed and without fear. "Always wondered what it'd be like," he said. "Nothing to fear." Moving his head a little, he focused his eyes on Jim Quartermain. "Can hardly see you now, but I know you're here. Real comforting, Jim, just knowing you're here."

He tried to smile, but the muscles did not quite make it. His breath went out in a long sigh, and then he relaxed completely. For a minute or two Jim watched him, then he gently pulled the sheet over Izee Beal's face.

Turning the lamp down until the room was deeply shadowed, he sat there for the better part of an hour, rousing himself only when he heard the front door open and close. He stepped into the hall and Cherokee Nye stopped. Quartermain shook his head once, then walked on past Nye and into the parlor.

Early next morning Izee Beal was buried in the shade of the cottonwood trees to the west of the house. Families began to gather. The undertaker came from town, a cadaverous man with a flapping coat who alternated his time between cutting hair and preaching when the occasion demanded.

Jim Quartermain remained at the grave while the others went to the house to eat the sandwiches the cook had made up for the funeral. He did not know any of these people, and they showed no inclination to get aquainted.

Standing along the edge of the room, he observed them. They were poor, and the marks of hard work were on all of them. Cherokee Nye came in with a tall, raw-boned man. Quartermain pushed through the crowd to shake his hand.

"Joel McKitrich," he said, pleased and smiling now.

McKitrich's voice was a soft, deep bass. "You look the same, Jim, which is a surprise. It's good to see you again."

Cherokee leaned his back against the living room wall and watched the people while he rolled a smoke. "The country's filling up with these squatters." He flickered a glance to McKitrich, then to Quartermain. "The word's got around that you're on the throne, Jim. They're curious as to what you're going to do about it."

Quartermain spoke to McKitrich. "Your wife out there?"

The tall man nodded. "We're just like the others, Jim, poor and a little worried. Izee tolerated 'em, but he's dead. You may not, and they're waiting to see."

"They squat along the river bottoms and in the best valleys," Cherokee said. "Jenner runs 'em off with a rifle. Be smart if you'd do the same." He licked his smoke and put a match to it. "A man's a fool to give up land he's fought for. These squatters have been pushed so much now they're used to it."

"I see," Quartermain said, and took out his pocket watch. "Better hitch up a buggy and go to Brownwood. Jane's probably due in on this evening's stage. Wait for her until she shows up."

"Now?" Cherokee seemed annoyed.

"There's no better time," Quartermain said, and watched him stomp angrily out of the house. Through the window he could see Cherokee cross the yard. Then he turned his attention back to Joel McKitrich.

McKITRICH was a man in his middle thirties, a quiet man with dark eyes and a grave manner. His hands were slender, the fingers lumpy across the knuckles. He wore his hair long and a close-clipped mustache filled his upper lip.

He said, "You shouldn't get sore, Jim. Cherokee'll never change."

The talk died off and the people stood motionless, watching Jim Quartermain. He said, "I don't know any of you, except McKitrich here, and that was from a day long past. But Izee Beal left the future of this ranch in my hands, and any policy he had with honest men I'll honor to the end. Should you find yourselves pressed, Running W is always good for a side of beef or a sack of flour. But if I find a hide on any man's place and he hasn't asked, then he'll leave."

He paused and looked at them. "I thank you for coming to the old man's funeral. Izee Beal was a man who liked his friends around him."

Quartermain walked out, leaving them to talk this over. Joel McKitrich followed him to the edge of the porch and rolled a cigarette. By the barn, Cherokee was hitching a pair of bays to the buggy. They watched him drive from the yard, the wheels whipping up dust like thick smoke.

McKitrich scraped a match against the porch post and said, "You meant that in there, Jim?"

"Sure. Did I do wrong?"

"No," McKitrich said. "They'll treat you right. Should you make Rob Jenner behave and raise Herefords, you'll need these squatters. They raise hay and feed, something you'll need to hand feed through the winter months."

"Where do you stand in this, Joel?"

"Between you and Jenner?" He laughed. "Nowhere, Jim. I've gone out of the business. Now I sleep good nights. No more dark streets and crazy kids with guns going after me, trying to make a reputation."

"Then you're lucky," Quartermain said, and left the porch. He walked to the corral where Cimarron waited. Quartermain said, "Saddle two horses. We're going to town."

He spun on his heel without waiting for an answer, and went into the house for Slimmie's gun and holster. He came out a few minutes later, buckled on the belt, and mounted when Cimarron led the horses up.

For a mile neither spoke. Then Quartermain asked, "Izee buy the wire yet?"

"It's in the warehouse at McKeogh and Shipley's store."

"We'll take it back with us then," Quartermain said matter-of-factly.

Interest began to rise in Cimarron's eyes. "Rob Jenner says no."

"We'll take it with us," Quartermain repeated. "The post holes dug?"

"The poles are set," Cimarron said. "You really going to string wire?"

"That's what it's for," Quartermain said, and nipped off the end of a cigar with his teeth. He scratched a match on the saddlehorn and cupped his hands around it. Dropping his glance to Cimarron's waist, he saw the Colt perched on the man's hip. "You still think you're pretty good with that?"

Cimarron grinned. "As good as most."

"I may need a man who's better than most," Quartermain told him.

The shine in the man's eyes grew brighter now. "I've heard it said you're better than Lee ever was. That's quite a rep to have."

"You may get your chance to earn one," Quartermain said. The heat was heavy and he removed his coat, draping it across his knees. The horses' hoofs plopped in the dust and raised small bombs. When they came to the fork in the road. Quartermain halted and said, "I want you to go to the Jenners. Tell them I'm in town and want to talk. Leave your gun with me and you'll be safe. A Jenner would as soon shoot himself as he would an unarmed man." When Cimarron unbuckled his belt and handed it over, Quartermain said, "This will be on the saddlehorn," and watched Cimarron veer off to the right.

AHEAD, Cherokee's buggy raised a plume of dust, but Quartermain did not try to catch up with him. The town was yet an hour's ride away and he walked the horse. In a short while the dark outline rose in the distance.

The one street was flanked by a double row of false fronts. A hotel sat on the near corner across from the saloon. The stable was at the far end, and between these extremities were wedged the smaller business houses.

Dismounting by the hotel, Quartermain walked down the street to the bank and went inside immediately. The room was cool and dim, hidden from the sun's blast. He found Horace Pendergast in his small office.

Pendergast got up, shook Quartermain's hand and said, "Jim, this is a surprise!" He saw Quartermain seated, then sat down behind his desk with his fingertips placed evenly together. "I was wondering if you'd come back," he said. "It's going to take a man like you to handle this."

"What kind of a man am I, Horace?"

The banker floundered for a moment. "Well, your reputation is pretty big, Jim. You know what I mean." He laughed and leaned forward, his smile genuine. "You going to fight Rob Jenner?"

Quartermain toyed with his cigar. "Buck him; yes. Fight him; no, not if I can avoid it. Fighting doesn't build, Horace. As a banker you know what a fight will do to the country. There are a lot of little people around here now who'd get hurt financially. I don't want them to be in the middle."

"I'm in the middle," Pendergast said, and went to a filing cabinet. He withdrew several sheets of paper and tossed them on his desk. "These are mortgages, Jim, taken in faith and now not worth the paper they're written on." He slapped them across his palm. "These people came to me broke, but honest. They needed money to work the land until they could prove up on it. There was no hint of trouble then, so I made the loans. Now it looks bad, very bad."

"You sound like a big-hearted man," Quar-

termain said. "I remembered you as being a little tight with a dollar."

Pendergast sighed. "Would you let them starve? Or force them to steal and then get shot for it?"

"I guess not," Quartermain said, "but between you and me, how many have proved up on the land?"

Pendergast's lips pulled down, then relaxed. "Seventy percent. But that doesn't pay off the mortgages. Something on your mind, Jim?"

"No," Quartermain said, "but I expect a man will fight harder for what's already his."

"So it *is* fight!"

"You know the Jenners, so you figure it out."

"I already have," Pendergast said, and watched Jim Quartermain walk out. He waited until he could no longer see Quartermain, then signaled for the young bookkeeper. "Go over to the saloon and tell Audie the Kid to come here. Tell him to use the alley door."

When the young man hurried out, Horace Pendergast sat hunched over in his chair, his fingers drumming the sheaf of mortgages on his desk.

In the mercantile, Quartermain found Vrain McKeogh in the back room checking his merchandise. Pausing in the doorway, Quartermain said, "I hear you got a shed full of wire that belongs to Running W."

McKEOGH straightened, a wiry little man with red hair. "I have. Also got a bet that Running W will never get it out of town."

"Whose side you on?"

"No side," McKeogh said. "Logic, that's what I use. Built my business on logic, not sentiment. The Jenners say you're not going to take the wire out. Been here a month now and Izee Beal couldn't move it. Tried twice. The last time men got killed over it."

"They say the third time's a charm," Quartermain said, and went through the store and back to the street. At the livery stable he rented two high-sided wagons and drove them to the rear of McKeogh and Shipley's store, parking them by the loading platform.

McKeogh came out and said, "All sentiment and no logic, that's your trouble. If you were otherwise, you wouldn't even be in this part of Texas."

"*You* be logical," Quartermain said, and jumped down. "Have them loaded by seven o'clock."

"I'll attend your funeral," McKeogh said, and yelled for a half-grown boy to get busy. He watched Quartermain go through the store and said, half to himself, "Such a nice young feller, too."

Quartermain ate at the hotel, his first full meal of the day. The wall clock stood at five and he dawdled over his second cup of coffee. A rider came into town and swung off. Cimarron stomped into the hotel, putting on his gun.

"They'll be here before dark," he said, and sat down. His shirt was dusty and sweat stained. He shook out the makings and spun a smoke. "There are too many, Jim. You'd better wait until you got some men behind you."

"I don't need men when all I'm going to do is talk. Clean up and eat."

Cimarron nodded and went into the back room to wash.

Exactly at six, Quartermain went to the mercantile to check the wagons and found them in the alley, loaded. He retraced his steps to the hotel. The sun was dying and, with it, the shocking heat. He took a seat on the hotel porch.

Cimarron exited from the saloon across the street, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He stood by the wall, a tall, loose-muscled man with a latent danger on his face. Watching him, Quartermain decided that he knew a great deal about the Cimarrons who moved around the west. They were usually rash men who were neither expert nor completely inefficient with their weapons. In a country where proficiency counted, they found themselves at odds both ways to the ace.

He had met his share of these men, all eager to fight and gain a reputation that would elevate them above the commonplace.

Out on the flats, a party of horsemen drummed nearer. From the other direction, a stage topped the brief rise northwest of town and dipped down to follow the curving road.

Quartermain turned his attention away from the stage and toward the riders approaching. He had lived in this country most of his life and he knew that sound, the drumming pound of the Jenners riding. They were nearer now, near enough so he could distinguish one from another. He saw Rob Jenner's flowing dark beard, the hulking shoulders of Bushrod, Parker the slim one—almost like a woman with his graceful manner—and Forney, slow-witted but dangerous as a bear when aroused.

The sound of the approaching stage was a rattle that built steadily in volume as it drew closer. The clatter of chains and the squeal of a dry axle came clearly across the remaining distance.

They entered town together, the Jenners and the stage from Fort Chadbourne. The stage pulled up in front of the hotel with smoking brakeblocks, and stopped in a swirling cloud of thick dust. Jim Quartermain stood up, throwing his cigar into the street.

ACROSS from him, the Jenners sat their horses, their eyes focused on Quartermain. His attention was fully on them when the stage door opened and Carrie Holderman said, "Jim!"

Her voice was an immeasurable shock to him. He came down the steps and took her arm, helping her dismount. "What are you doing here, Carrie?"

The stage swayed as Gil Purvis got down, stamping his feet to restore the circulation in his legs. He wore a new suit and a flowing tie tucked into an embroidered vest.

Shooting Quartermain an amused glance, he said, "Surprised?"

Quartermain sighed with some exasperation, and looked at Carrie. She studied his face in the half-light, uncertain of his disposition. "I told you I'd follow you, Jim. Didn't you believe me?"

"Yes," he said. "I believed you."

Quartermain guided her up the hotel steps and into the lobby. Across the street, saddle leather creaked as the Jenners dismounted. Gil Purvis looked around and said, "Oh, oh, old ugly's still around."

Pausing before the desk, Jim Quartermain said, "The lady would like a room, please."

He laid a twenty-dollar gold piece on the desk blotter. The clerk extended a key and Jim Quartermain took it as boots rattled across the porch and the Jenners came into the room, pausing just inside the door.

Rob Jenner thrust his huge head forward. His sons arrayed themselves behind him in a loose string. Parker, the thin one, pushed by his brother, Forney. Parker wore two guns in cross-draw holsters.

Rob Jenner moved deeper into the room, his sons following, their Mexican rowel spurs dragging across the bare floor like chains clanking. They brought with them the smell of danger, of inflexible will and power.

Taking Carrie Holderman's arm, Quartermain walked toward the stairs. Gil Purvis sagged against a column and said, "Guess I'll stay and keep Mr. Jenner and his boys company. Care for a drink, gents?"

The old man's head turned stiffly and he stared at Purvis for a moment. Here was a man who had worn the Running W brand for years, an enemy of the Jenners. But Purvis was offering reserved friendliness, and Rob Jenner nodded and bellied up against the bar with his boys.

Quartermain went to the second floor with Carrie and unlocked her door for her. He went in ahead of her and lighted two lamps while the boy trudged up the stairs with her luggage. After this had been placed in the corner the boy went out, closing the door.

Carrie stripped off her gloves and removed her hat, laying these on the bed. She brushed at the dust covering her dark dress. It was in her hair, a powder on her face.

She glanced at Jim Quartermain and said, "I don't think you are glad that I came."

He had intended to remain detached, even distant, but the soft pull of her voice was a power he could not resist. "Carrie," he said, and took a step toward her. She came to him frankly, honestly, her lips searching for his. He kissed her with a longing he had not wished to reveal and at last she leaned back, still in his arms.

"You are glad," she said.

"This is not too wise," he said softly. "This isn't your parlor."

The lighting of a cigar gave function to his hands. She watched his face and eyes,

smiling, for she knew how much he needed her and how hard he was trying to cover that need.

"Is your father coming?"

"No, Jim. I came with Gil Purvis."

He frowned.

"Proper ladies don't think of things like this, let alone do them."

"A woman in love is not a proper lady," she said, "although many won't admit it. Were you in time, Jim?"

HE NODDED. "He died a few hours after I got here." The cigar tasted bitter to him and he rolled it between his fingers, examining it. "I'm the boss now and Running W is half mine. I'm not sure whether I like it or not."

"Those men who came in downstairs—they're not your friends, are they?"

"Those are the Jenners," he said. "I would like it if they were not openly enemies either." He sighed and blew out a cloud of thin smoke. "Likely I'll fight them, but they've come here tonight to talk, a thing that they do very little of."

"I believe I've interrupted something," she said. "Was that the reason you were displeased?"

"Carrie, I wasn't displeased." He took her arms and held her lightly. His smile was soft and pleasant and he kissed her again. "When I go back to the ranch tonight I'll take you with me."

Her smile teased him. "A moment ago you were worried about my coming here seeming improper. Won't this look strange, Jim?"

"Jane Beal will be home tomorrow or the next day," he said. "It'll be all right."

A new seriousness moved into her eyes, shoving the laughter out. "Does everything have to be perfect, Jim? Can't we play the game one time without shuffling the deck?" She turned and opened a canvas valise. "I got this from your desk," she said, and handed him his .44 Remington.

He unbuckled Slimmie's gun and tossed it on the bed. She watched him while he adjusted the harness with practiced movements of his fingers.

"I didn't want to bring it," she said. "That gun is a rival of mine and I'm jealous. I'd like to fling it down a deep well so that you could never get it out." Quartermain snapped it up from the holster and half-cocked it. "It's loaded," she said. "Six bullets."

"Carrie," he said, wait here. I'll be back soon."

I know," she murmured. She followed him to the door and stood there until he disappeared below the top of the stairs. She heard a man's grumbled voice from below and went back inside, closing the door softly.

Rob Jenner turned as Quartermain stopped in the small ell where Purvis stood. Quartermain placed his hands flat on the polished surface and said, "Rob, we got a few things to talk out."

"I did my talking to Izee Beal," Rob Jenner said, his voice like heavy thunder. "We just came in to tell you to your face."

"The old man's gone," Quartermain said. "Now I'm the boss of the Running W."

"Sure he's gone. I shot him," Parker said. He stepped away from the bar, his hands hooked in his belt. "I've been hearing how good you are, Jim. You want to try your luck with me?"

Rob Jenner's voice was a rumble. "Shut your face and get back in behind me where you belong."

"There stands the man who killed Abe."

Jenner flung his huge arm back and caught Parker in the chest with the back of his hand, knocking the young man against the bar. "Hold your peace, wild one! Abe got his fair and square, so there are no complaints now, you understand? We came here to talk in peace, and no Jenner'll break it."

The old man placed his attention on Quartermain.

"String no wire, get me? Fence no land that a Jenner rides across."

"You ranch Long Knife," Quartermain said, "and leave Running W business to me."

"Ha!" Jenner said, and slapped the bar. "You think I'm a fool? If you fence, that forces me to fence too. I'm keeping my money, not stringing it out on poles and that's my final word."

"I want no trouble between us," Quartermain said flatly. "I advise you to meet Running W halfway. If we can't be friends, then we'll leave each other alone."

"WE MAKE no bargain with man or animal," Rob Jenner declared. "I've never had to and never will. That's my flat word! I came to this country as a boy, when there was nothing but Comanche lodges and buffalo. Buried my woman and three daughters and a son in Texas earth. I play rough, mind you. Like it that way, so bear it in mind. You go ahead and dream all you please about how you're going to shape the country, but don't interfere with me. I like it the way I got it. I don't want anything different."

"You know," Quartermain said, "you've never been licked and it's gone to your head."

He offered this challenge gently and watched it eat into Rob Jenner's pride. He knew the man well, understood him, for Jenner was a simple man, not stupid, but elemental in his emotions. He could love or hate with equal violence.

"Well," Jenner said softly, "I could give you a chance to lick me."

"With fists," Quartermain said and smiled.

Gil Purvis shifted his weight near Quartermain and said, "Easy now. He wasn't just flapping his mouth, Jim. He's rough."

"Let's find out how rough," Quartermain said, and unbuckled his gun, slapping it down hard on the bar. Jenner laughed and removed the pistol from beneath his coat, sliding it toward Quartermain's gun. Then he stepped away and shrugged his shoulders.

Rob Jenner was six foot and solidly muscled. He was near sixty, but age had not softened him in mind or body. Quartermain watched him approach and came away from the bar like a released spring. His fists broke through Jenner's rising guard and battered the man across the nose. Jenner bellowed and swung, but Quartermain was away now, in the clear, and he waited for the big man to advance.

That was the surprise, he told himself, the lucky punch. He knew he would not get another. The fight would get rough now and Jenner would make Quartermain work, pay dearly to land a solid blow. Quartermain had hit Jenner hard, hurt him, but pain had no permanent effect on the man.

Rob Jenner charged like an enraged bull, head down, arms flailing.

Trying to duck aside, Quartermain caught a slash from one of Jenner's thrashing arms. The blow carried him backward, halfway across the room. Quartermain struck the wall with a numbing force as Rob Jenner veered toward him. Sinking quickly, Quartermain let a wild blow pass over his head. Jenner yelled as his fist struck the wall.

Jabbing, Quartermain threw the man backward, across a heavy table and onto the floor. Rolling as he came erect, Quartermain followed Jenner and was ready when the man got to his feet. The man's right hand sported two broken knuckles and Jenner let the arm dangle, content to fight the rest of the way with his left.

Quartermain struck Jenner on the bridge of the nose again, and once on the cheekbone, all the while weathering the punishment of Jenner's left hand. The big man staggered back a step but did not go down. He hit Jim Quartermain alongside the head and watched him skid on the sawdust-covered floor. Quartermain's sliding body cut the legs from under a small table and he came to rest against the wall.

Rob Jenner stood flat footed, blood dripping from his nose. Quartermain shoved himself erect and moved into the big man. Changing pace suddenly, Quartermain belted Jenner along the edge of his mouth and once in the stomach before retreating out of reach. Jenner's left hand dropped and Quartermain came in on the left, striking him a driving blow that left Jenner's eyes round and dull.

The man tried to take a step, and the strength left him. His knees wilted like melting candles. Then he fell limply into the sawdust and lay still. Along the bar a sudden flurry of movement drew Quartermain's attention away from Rob Jenner.

Gil Purvis said, "Don't do it, Parker!"

PURVIS had lifted Quartermain's gun and was holding the hammer back with the palm of his left hand. Parker Jenner let his revolver slide back into its holster and turned his back to the room, his elbows planted solidly on the bar.

Quartermain retrieved his gun from Purvis and put it on. His breathing was ragged and blood trickled down his left cheek. The side

of his face carried a deadness from Jenner's fists. Jenner was stirring, trying to sit up. He raised his head and looked around the room.

"Did one of my sons pull his pistol?" Blood dripped off his chin and one eye was beginning to close.

"Let it go," Jim Quartermain said.

Cimarron came in then, stopping in the doorway. He looked at the Jenner boys lined up by the bar, and Rob, standing now, his face battered.

"Did one of my boys flourish a weapon?" Rob Jenner repeated. "I mean to be answered, dammit!"

Purvis said, "Parker had an idea."

"So!" Jenner said, and swiveled his head to his youngest son. Parker knew what was coming and pushed away from the bar, trying to make the door, but his father caught him. He grappled with the boy, shouting, "So my boy pulls his pistol!"

Parker tried to fight back, but Rob slapped him several times. "A fair fight, and you flourish your pistol! I brought you up better than that!"

He muscled the young man to the floor and held him scissored between his legs while he stripped Parker of his weapons. Tossing these to his other sons, he straightened and gave Parker a shove that sent him reeling against the bar. Parker leaned against the bar, massaging the back of his neck.

"I apologize for the boy's actions," Rob said.

Stepping away from the bar, Quartermain spoke quietly. "Gil, are you looking for work or are you too rich to think about it?"

"I'm never that rich. What do I do?"

"Take Cimarron with you and pick up one of the wagons that's parked behind McKeogh and Shipley's store. I'll follow you in the other."

Purvis glanced at the Jenners and moved away from the bar. When he went out, Cimarron followed him. Rob Jenner scrubbed a hand across his battered face and shook his head. "I didn't want this, Quartermain, indeed I didn't. Don't string any wire. I'd rather you didn't."

"People have to change with the times," Quartermain said. "Let's have no trouble over it. The wire's going to Running W tonight."

"I can't back down on my word," Rob Jenner said. "Man, you're making me fight you now."

"Two to one," Quartermain pointed out. "Parker's guns are on the bar. So is yours. Forney's slow, Rob; I'd get him easy. I can beat Bushrod and you know it. That's two dead men, Rob, just because you can't take back something you said."

"I don't like it, but you're forcing me."

A step creaked as someone came down the stairs. The Jenners looked around. Rob Jenner was surprised and angry when Carrie Holderman crossed the small barroom and stood between them and Jim Quartermain. She presented her back squarely to the Jenners.

"Will I have to ride in the wagon, Jim?"

Her face was flushed and her fists tightly clenched. She was afraid and hiding it well. This was not a stupid woman, or a weak one, Quartermain saw. She was a fighter who had walked into this fully aware of the building danger, and she was neutralizing the Jenners as effectively as if she were waving a shotgun.

Quartermain smiled.

"As soon as these gentlemen are through talking we'll go." He met Rob Jenner's eyes and silently told him that he would take this up another time if the Jenners were inclined. Jenner looked uncertain for a moment, then nodded to his boys. They filed out, boots thumping across the porch.

SIGHING deeply, Jim Quartermain said, "Carrie, a man's pride is supposed to be a very tender thing. According to the rules I should resent your interfering and rush into the street to take up the fight. But I'm honest enough to admit I'm relieved to get out of it."

"But there will be another time, won't there? I brought you only a postponement."

"That's right," he said and went upstairs for her bags.

It was near nine when they went into the alley behind McKeogh and Shipley's store and Quartermain loaded her baggage on top of the barbed wire, then helped her to the

high seat. Her long skirts were a hindrance and she gathered them tightly about her legs. The other wagon was gone. Quartermain clucked to the team and they moved out.

The Jenners were sitting their horses along the darkened street as Quartermain drove out. From the shadows of the harnessmaker's store, Horace Pendergast stepped out and the Jenners all swung around to look at him. Pendergast touched a match to his cigar, the momentary flare revealing his blocky face.

He said, "Quartermain made a fool out of you, didn't he? I never thought I'd see the day."

"There's another time coming," Rob Jenner said, his bass voice a rumble.

"He put you on the run once; he'll do it again," Pendergast said. "That's Ben Bickerstaff's boy, Rob, and what Bickerstaff didn't teach him, Lee did. You'll go some to find a man who can beat him to the draw."

"I'm not afraid of him," Parker said.

"Takes more than courage," Pendergast said. He turned his head to Rob Jenner. "You'll never whip Quartermain, not the way you fight. You are too honest."

"What are you trying to say?"

"One of two things. Either get a man who can face him and win—" he paused to puff his cigar— "or get a man who doesn't mind shooting him in the back."

"Why, by God—"

"Just a minute!" Pendergast's voice was sharp. "You have no choice, Jenner. If Quartermain strings that fence, you're cut off from a good winter range. Do you actually think you can make him quit?" Pendergast put just enough laughter into his voice to make it smart. "You can't and you know it."

He came closer to Rob Jenner's stirrup and spoke in a softer voice. "I have a big stake in the San Saba, Jenner, and I don't want to sit by and watch you blow it away for me."

"So?"

"So there happen to be a couple of men in town who are working for me. They can do you a lot of good. I'll send them out in the morning."

"What kind of men?"

"Don't go proud on me," Pendergast said. "Jenner, you'll do this my way or you'll lose everything in three months."

"I got no cash to hire men," Jenner said.

"Let me worry about the finances," the banker said. "I have a large stake in this, Rob, so just consider them a loan. Remember, I don't want to get openly involved; we'll keep this between ourselves. I'll send the men out to Long Knife. They'll know what to do."

"Gunfighters?"

Pendergast studied the ash on his cigar. "Let's just say that these men are a little bolder than the average. Suit you?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not much," Pendergast admitted, "unless you want to hand it all over to Jim Quartermain."

"All right," Jenner said, somewhat reluctantly. "Send 'em out."

He gigged his horse with his heels and his sons followed him from town at a trot.

FOR an hour Jim Quartermain drove in silence. The dull plodding of the team was the only break in the monotony. Finally Carrie Holderman said, "Crystal City came apart at the seams the night you left, Jim."

"I thought it would."

"Kurt Harlow tried to take over the town, but he didn't make it."

Quartermain peered through the darkness at the pale oval of her face. "Dead?"

"No," she said, "but he was badly beaten. He got away from the vigilantes and left town on a fast horse."

"He won't like that," Quartermain said softly. "The man's pride was the biggest thing about him. I suppose my name is unpopular in Crystal City?"

"Very," she said and took his arm, hugging it against her side and the soft swell of her breast. "Quartermain is a dirty word now. Does it really bother you?"

"A little. A man likes to leave a clean slate behind." He looked at her. "What am I going to do with you, Carrie?"

"Marry me." She tried for a certain lightness, but it did not come off. Her desire was too strong, her longing too real for joking.

"Nothing has changed," he said. "I'm sorry, Carrie."

She sat quietly for a momant. "Jim, are you in love with someone else?"

"No," he said. "I'd know if I were and I'd tell you."

"I'm not so sure," she said, and when he flipped his head around, added, "—about knowing, I mean." She grew thoughtful. "What about Jane Beal? You've told me a lot about Andy and Izee, but never about Jane. I suppose this is one of the small things that women are supposed to pick on, but I've always wondered if she meant something special to you. Did she, Jim?"

"Yes," he admitted honestly. "Once she did." He fired a cigar, his face grave in the brief flare of the match. "But that's all over. She's older now, and she's probably forgotten about it."

"But you did love her?"

"I don't know," he said. "What does a man of twenty know about love?" He sighed and puffed on his cigar. "I haven't seen Jane since she was sixteen, Carrie. I don't know what she'll be like now. But once we were very close. Blame it on the fact that we were both young and wanted to find out what life was all about. I know of no other way to express it."

"I see," Carrie said softly. "I thought it was something like that, but I always had the foolish notion that it was the woman who felt guilty afterward."

"Carrie, we were children! It's not the same."

"That's what you keep saying, yet you remember, so what's the difference?"

Quartermain didn't know what the difference was. He butted his cigar against the wagon box and threw the dead shards into the grass near the roadside.

"Jim, was the reason you wouldn't marry me because you were afraid that someday you'd see Jane again and have that feeling all come back? Were you afraid that you'd find out that you didn't love me enough and then be sorry?"

"Something like that," he admitted. He pulled the team to a halt and wrapped the reins around the brake handle. Taking her by the shoulder, he half-turned her toward him. "Carrie, I never wanted to hurt you. But if we did marry and then I had to face something like that, you'd be hurt. We couldn't hide the truth from each other."

"I know that," she said softly. When she turned her head away from him he unwrapped the reins and drove on.

"I've made a prime ass of myself, haven't I?" Her voice was deep and controlled. "Coming here, following you like an impulsive school-girl. I was thinking of orange blossoms and an organ playing soft music. You must really be laughing at me, Jim."

He said, "I'll have Gil take you into town in the morning and see that you get on the stage."

HER silence was so long that he thought she had accepted this. Then she said, "I'm going to stay. I want to meet her, Jim. She's used weapons on you that I haven't got. If I have to fight for you, then I don't want to be denied anything."

She reached across to the reins and pulled the team to a halt. Then she twisted on the seat and leaned back across his lap. Her arms came up around his neck and her lips searched until they found his. She had never kissed him like this before, but now she showed him the full depth of her love. There was that essence of the gambler in her, a controlled boldness that allowed her to take a chance other women would have avoided. When she pulled her lips away from his she leaned against him, emotion dying within them like rippling waves on a quiet pool.

"You see," she said. "I can do the same thing; any pretty woman can, Jim." Then her determination faltered and her faith parted for a moment and she had to ask. "Was it the same, Jim? Was there no difference?"

His voice was a whisper against her hair. "I don't want to compare you to anyone, Carrie. You can see why I have to be sure. You wouldn't want me any other way."

"No," she said and sat upright on the seat. "I wouldn't want you any other way."

Jim Quartermain looked at her in the darkness, trying to retain some grip on the moment passed, but it was gone beyond recall. He picked up the reins and clucked

the team into motion. Held back by the heavy load and slow pace, it was almost midnight when they pulled into the ranch yard. There was a small light on in the bunkhouse, and one in the parlor.

Gil Purvis pranced across the porch and offered Carrie a hand down. Cimarron came across the yard on the run and led the team and wagon to the barn. Purvis had made himself at home and had taken Carrie's baggage to Andy's old room.

"Man," Purvis said, "just smell that clean Texas air." He glanced at the bruises on Quartermain's cheeks. "Feeling pretty tough in the hotel lobby, weren't you?"

"Maybe. Rob Jenner understood that a lot better than words."

"Damned curly wolf," Purvis said with some admiration. "You think he'll fight?"

"He's never turned one down," Quartermain said. "He's made his talk and now he'll back it."

"Big-mouthed old billy goat! He'll cuss the undertaker for not laying him out proper." Boots rattled across the porch and Purvis closed his mouth as Cimarron came in.

Quartermain said, "Get the crew together at daybreak. We're going to string wire."

Cimarron grunted. "You don't let any grass grow under your feet, do you?"

"Am I supposed to? See that the men are armed with rifles, and have Cookie load up a wagon to take along. We'll leave a guard with each piece of fence that goes up."

"That's asking for a fight," Cimarron said.

Quartermain said, "If you want to give orders around here, learn to take a few!"

"All right, all right, all right," Cimarron said, and went back to the bunkhouse.

"What's he sore about?" Purvis asked.

"Ask him."

"I may just do that," Purvis said and yawned hugely.

After Purvis left, Quartermain blew out the lamp and made his way down the dark hall to Izee Beal's room. He scratched a match, got the lamp working, then took off his coat and shirt. Removing his gun harness, he sat on the edge of the bed to worry off his boots.

He felt bone tired and the whole side of his face ached. Raising a hand to touch the bruise, he found that he badly needed a shave.

To hell with it, he thought, and turned down the lamp. With the Jenners about to make war, he might not live long enough to bother with it. He lay back and folded his arms over his face.

(To be continued in the next issue)

Coming in the next issue

MAN FROM THE BRAZOS

Every man looked twice at Lea Hagen . . . but sudden death awaited the few who were brave enough to seek her love

A Magazine-Length Novel

By RAY GAULDEN

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Ed Vane was cruel and dangerous . . . and desperate enough to try anything that would keep him from going to jail

An Exciting Novelette

By JANE L. BRANCH

Randy flirted with Carol, and his teasing melted her reserve

Unwritten I.O.U.

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

JOE CHRISMAN, fidgeting with his glass, glanced to where Randy Farr sat playing poker, and wished his partner would finish his game. In fact, Joe downright wished his friend had never sat down with Ed Blount, Walter Prade, and the other two cattlemen. Those men played for high stakes, a long shot above the penny-ante which was all the Farr-Chrisman horse ranch could stand. Joe had been standing at the bar for an hour, finding less and less warmth in his whisky as Randy's chips shrank after each called hand.

Joe thought, why doesn't he get out? Back when his dad owned half this country he could play like that. But there's been a war since then, and there've been forced sales. The name Farr doesn't talk any louder now than when the Confederate money some of us are still hanging onto.

But the Farr name had spoken mighty loud once, which made things a lot tougher for Randy than for Joe. The Chrismans had never owned anything but a scrubby little spread of blackbrush and devil's-head thorns. Joe still had that. It wasn't important enough

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IT DIDN'T make sense for Joe to adopt a frightened dancehall girl . . . when his other responsibilities were turning his hair gray

or big enough for Blount or any of the Union sympathizers to want.

Randy, though Joe had made him his partner, had nothing left he really cared about but a gray captain's uniform and a dangerous two-edged pride. So, in spite of his worry over Randy's losses, Joe didn't go over and try to make his friend quit.

It'd be their last trip to town for a while. Early next morning Joe was supposed to meet Clyde Parma, who had a contract with the cavalry post downriver, and fix a price on the twenty good horses he and Randy had brought to town that day. Parma, a stranger to Joe, had the contract for supplying beef, too. That was probably why the cattlemen were all there.

It was a crazy twist—Joe Chrisman, late of Rip Ford's command, selling mounts to bluecoat cavalry. But Texas, in 1869, had enough troubles, without digging at slow-healing sores.

Joe wished Randy could get that through his hard blond head. Look at the kid, playing cards with men he'd scarcely speak to on the street! Randy was scowling. Maybe, thought Joe, I'd better go pry him loose before he gets mean.

Sighing, Joe started across the room. He had to pass the stairs that led to the girls' rooms above. As he came even with them there was a flash of swirling yellow silk, and a girl was behind him, shielding herself from a heavy, tall man with auburn hair.

The man reached past Joe as if he thought Joe were a piece of the bannister, and grabbed for the girl. But she shifted trickily, her fingernails digging into Joe's shoulders as she kept behind him. Joe was in no mood to have a saloon girl use him to whet her boy friend's appetite. He brought her hands down from his back.

He snapped, "Go play somewhere else!"

The girl caught hold of him again. "Please!" Her voice was desperate and it made Joe look at her. Her dark eyes were huge and scared, and her mouth quivered at the edges. Somehow she didn't look like just a brassy dame giving an admirer a chase. "Please!" she cried again. "Don't let him—"

"Keep out of this," said the redhead. He was old enough to be the girl's father, but there was nothing paternal in his hot hazel eyes. "Go on, stranger. The lady and I are busy."

SHE didn't speak again, but she shrank close to Joe and looked at him like a fawn in a trap. Joe wanted nothing less than a brawl—on top of his guarding of Randy—but, when the big man started to take the girl's arm, Joe stepped in front of her.

"The lady doesn't share your thinking, mister. Better hunt another friend."

"She's here of her own free will, isn't she? Now keep your nose out of my business!" The man took the girl's wrist and was about to jerk her forward.

Joe had found that talking was generally a waste of time in a spot like this. He gave the redhead a good solid shove and, when the thwarted lover raged back swinging, Joe planted his fist in the heavier man's floating ribs.

"Clear out!" Joe called to the girl, while her anxious pursuer gasped and doubled.

In her gleaming yellow gown and chiffon shawl, she looked as out of place here as a downy gold chick in a cock fight. "I can't," she whispered moaningly. "I'll get fired."

Joe was so jarred he took his gaze off the redhead a second to stare at her. What went with the kid, anyhow? Didn't she know her job was putting up with men like the one who was after her now? Joe was still trying to figure her, when a fist took him gratingly in the windpipe and a sharp-toed boot drove into his kneecap. Red had some sense, Joe thought, in the minute before he fell, dazed and choking.

He heard the girl's scream and the sound of her running feet, but his brain was foggy and he couldn't get up.

When Joe next took an interest in things, he found himself on the steps of the saloon, sort of folded over on the girl, his head splitting. He straightened in a hurry, and saw that Randy was glaring down at him.

"We might as well go home," Randy growled. "You know who you slugged?" Joe remembered he'd been floored when he wasn't looking. He rubbed his sore throat and hitched himself upright.

"Whoever he was, I'm going back and belt him again!" The girl tugged at his sleeve. Joe, blaming her for the whole mess, shook free. "What're you doing out here?"

"I can't go back. I quit my job."

Oh, no, not a woman dumping her troubles on him, too! Joe turned slowly to face her. "Well, seems to me you're changing your mind a little late in the day, but that's up to you. Now ma'am, if you'll move out of the way, I've got to see a man inside."

"Hold on!" Randy grabbed Joe's arm. "Don't go hot-heading back in there, or you'll land in jail. Those cattlemen will claim you started the whole thing. Besides, that red-haired guy happens to be Clyde Parma."

"Parma?" Joe froze, as he realized Randy wasn't kidding. "I reckon that knocks out our chance of getting a contract."

RANDY nodded. "It does if you go stir up more hell. But, no one but us has many horses for sale. Why don't you go back to the ranch, and maybe I can make the deal with Parma tomorrow morning? I don't like the guy any better than you do, Joe, but we can't eat horse's tails all winter. We need that sale."

You're telling me? Joe thought, rubbing the back of his neck. He wanted to go in and ram Parma's red face down his thick throat. A couple of years ago he would have. But after you lose a war you learn to put up with a lot of things, for the hope of someday getting out from under the bottom of the pile. Joe still had his self-respect, but he wasn't wearing it on his shoulder these days. He managed a grin for Randy.

"Guess you're right, kid. Do the best you can. I'll go on out to the ranch." Knowing Randy's quick resentment, Joe added as lightly as he could, "And say, haven't you had enough poker? Blount plays for meaty stakes."

Randy pulled away from Joe's friendly hand. "Don't worry about me, Deacon! See you tomorrow."

Frowning, a little hurt, Joe watched Randy go back in the saloon. He had forgotten the girl. He jerked in surprise as she asked softly, "Your brother?"

"No," Joe said harshly. Then he was ashamed, even before she lowered her chin and sort of gulped. "Randy's my partner," Joe explained in a more gentle tone. "He's only twenty-two. Huffs up sometimes, but he'll grow out of it."

The girl looked up, and Joe saw the tears edging along the sides of a straight little nose, though she was trying hard to smile.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's none of my business. I hope that the trouble won't keep you from getting the contract. Thank you for helping me, and good-by."

For sure, she hadn't the tough veneer of most saloon women. As she went past Joe, walking fast, Joe saw the orange-murky light from the saloon door brand her. Suddenly he couldn't stand there and let her go. Before he could remind himself that to get rid of her was exactly what he had wanted, he started after her.

"Miss, you said you'd quit your job. You got folks in town?" The minute he said it, he knew he shouldn't have. What kind of folks would let a girl who couldn't be over seventeen or eighteen work in a saloon?

She kept her face turned from him. "No. I just got here today."

Joe felt his ears growing hot but, having opened his big mouth, he got stubborn. "Would you want to go back home?" he persisted, matching his steps to hers. "I could loan you stage fare."

She swung around to face him. "No, thanks. You see, my uncle doesn't want me at home. He thinks I'm wicked to the tips of my toenails, and I couldn't stand it any more!"

She was breathing hard, her hands were clenched, and a kind of desperation seemed to tear the words from her. "I went to a dance last Saturday—just a dance, with a nice boy. When we came home my uncle beat the boy up and said awful, nasty things to me! I couldn't stay after that, no matter what. This town was as far as my money would bring me. The man at the hotel told me I might get a job here as a waitress. I didn't know—I thought all I had to do was wear this dress and laugh and be gay."

GAY? You poor little fool! Joe's thoughts must have shown on his face, because the girl lifted her head and the steel of lonely pride iced her voice.

"Never mind all this. I'll find something. Good night."

Joe blocked her path. "Yeah, you'll find something—a kid like you in this cow town! Look, don't you have some clothes you can change into? That yellow thing must belong in there." He jerked his head at the saloon.

Her dark eyes seemed to weigh him. "I have a suitcase at the hotel," she said. With a faint smile she touched the ruffles at her breast. "This *does* belong to the job."

"Well, you can change while I settle your hotel bill. I'll tell the clerk to send that frilly gown back here." His tongue got thick and confused, and he hoped she wouldn't think he was on the prowl. "The way things are, I've got no better suggestion than for you to come on out to the ranch. I'm too broke to board you in town and, honest, there just aren't any jobs here for a nice girl. It's a pretty tough place. Something may turn up but, till it does, you need a safe place to live."

"But how about your partner Randy? He might not—"

"Oh, Randy was kind of unmannerly tonight on account of losing at poker, and that row with Parma tied him in a loop. He'll be glad to have you." He grinned and took her arm.

An hour later they rode out of town. Joe had learned that she had lived on a ranch, and her name was Carol. Her clothes had been transferred from the suitcase to a tarp, and she was using Randy's horse. Joe told the hotel desk clerk to leave Randy word that Carol needed the horse and that he, Joe, would come into town next day with the buckboard.

"I'll make a real trip of it," Joe said to Carol as they rode through the night. "I'll pick up my partner, your suitcase, and some groceries. Pretty good haul?" It wasn't a funny remark, Joe knew, but he had said it to try to relax the tension that was building up, and to reassure the girl.

She didn't answer, and finally he said, "Let's get this straight." He could almost feel her shrinking, and somehow it heightened his anger. She had got him into this whole mess with Parma, maybe ruined the chance of a sale, and now she was acting like a skittish colt. "I'm taking you home because I don't know what else to do with you. You'll be perfectly safe. Understand?"

He heard the inrush of her breath with savage satisfaction. Guess she knew where he stood, now! She yanked her mount past him.

"I understand, Mr. Chrisman. I wasn't even thinking about you, believe it or not. I was thinking of what people will say."

"Not half what they'd say about a saloon hostess." It was brutal, but she had to stop kidding herself. "Sure they'll talk. But that can't hurt you, if you yourself know they're wrong. It's a long shot from pleasant but, in this life, you do what you can instead of moaning over mistakes and making excuses to everybody."

"I'm not making excuses. And stop preaching—Deacon, isn't that what your partner called you?"

IT WAS what Randy called him—the stinging little taunt he tossed at Joe the few times Joe had tried to calm down the younger man. Now, watching Carol Ballard, Joe bit his lip.

He had himself a pair, all right—Carol and Randy, both with the bits in their teeth and ready to bolt. He sighed.

The real explosion would be when Randy found out they'd adopted Carol. Joe would have to try to explain it to the kid before Randy got to the ranch tomorrow. If Parma bought the horses, it would help considerably. Joe had spent his last folding money to get Carol paid out of the hotel.

For a second the moon came out from under the clouds. Joe looked at Carol's figure, the promising sweetness of her body, and a new fear gripped him.

He'd promised Carol safety. But Randy was young and quick with girls. He might be *too* glad to have her as a guest.

At breakfast next morning—Carol had it on the table when Joe woke up—they didn't talk. Once, glancing sideways, Joe said, "These are top-notch biscuits, Carol."

"Thanks," she said, and that was their whole conversation. She was wearing a blue-and-white checked gingham dress with a sedate collar, and her curly black hair was tied back with a matching ribbon. She acted cool and calm.

Joe, driving the buckboard toward town later that morning, pondered it. He just couldn't believe the scared girl of the saloon last night could be the composed young lady who had been washing out the cupboards when he left the ranch.

Scowling, he speeded up the team, and wondered if women changed their characters when they changed their clothes.

As he got near town, his mind switched from Carol to the closer problem of Randy. If the deal with Parma hadn't worked out,

"You're out of focus, dear. Move forward a little"

Randy would probably be getting dead drunk or fighting with someone. But Joe optimistically tried the hotel first.

Randy was in his room, but he was asleep. Lying there with his arms outflung, Randy looked like the boy of sixteen who had joined Joe's army outfit six years ago, when Joe was twenty-four. Randy had gotten in so much hot water that Joe had drifted into watching out for the youngster, and it had been that way ever since. But something about the war had soured Randy's laughter.

Joe leaned over him and gave him a shake. "Hey, Randy, come out of it!"

Randy brought up a protesting arm and tried to roll over, but Joe shook him harder. "Kid, wake up! You'll miss Parma."

The name seemed to touch Randy's consciousness. His lips drew down and he sat up, jerking free of Joe.

"Miss Parma?" He laughed harshly. "I've already dealt with that gentleman. Last night —or was it early this morning?"

Nerves rasping, Joe watched his partner bring his booted feet woodenly to the floor. Randy had a bad hang-over. God help the Farr-Chrisman horse ranch if Randy'd driven any bargains when he was drunk as he must have been last night. Joe fought to keep his voice level.

"Well? Parma make us a good price?"

RANDY took his hands away from his head, and went over to the wash basin to souse his face. His answer came out muffled by the towel. "Oh, sure, a dandy price." Then, in a shamed defiant whisper, "Just the amount I lost to Blount in poker."

Joe took a step forward before he could check himself. The money they needed to keep going, gone in a couple of hours at cards! Joe couldn't believe it, and yet he did. He had never been more angry in his life.

"You mean you gambled away my money?"

Randy threw down the towel. His lips looked bluish in his white face. "I thought it'd come out someday. *Your* money, *your* ranch. You call me partner and go on about its being half mine. You think I can't hear you holding your breath every time I'm out of your sight?" He strode over to the dresser, scrawled out a note in a jagged handwriting, and threw the IOU toward Joe. "There! The partnership's busted. I'll pay you your stinking four hundred bucks some way, and then I'm getting out of this country. There's nobody left here but penny-pinchers and Yankees."

Hurt and furious, Joe felt for an instant like slugging Randy and calling the whole mess settled. But the habit of years was strong. The red haze faded, and Joe saw Randy as a frightened rebellious youngster who couldn't get it out of his head that the old days were gone, everywhere.

"Randy, if the name Farr is going to mean anything proud to your kids, you'll have to make it do that." Bending, Joe took the scrap

of paper and tore up the unwanted promise. "Forget it, kid. I'd already messed up the Parma deal. Let's go home and chase some more horses."

Randy glared. Joe watched him steadily. The stiffness went out of the younger man's neck, and for a minute his eyes were naked, dependent.

I'm roped, Joe thought. Like it or not, I'm roped. He's simply got to have someone to keep him headed straight. He's like a colt who was broke mean and about to go outlaw.

"That Blount," Randy grunted, picking up his hat. "Blamed Union-lover! He said half the money was yours, and he'd just forget that part of the debt."

Joe asked for Carol's suitcase at the desk before he turned back to Randy. "Oh? I guess you made Blount pick up the money at pistol point."

Randy snorted. "You can bet I would have. You think I'm going to have that guy tell everyone how kind he was to that down-and-out Randy Farr?" Joe had always sort of liked Blount, figured him as a square shooter; but he was poison to Randy, since he'd bought up part of the old Farr holdings.

Joe tossed the suitcase into the buckboard and dug in his pocket for his change. "Like I said, Randy, forget it. But don't be sitting in a game again till we can afford it, sabe? Now fork over any cash you got. I have to buy beans and flour and stuff."

Randy brought out a few small bills and some silver. "I'm sorry, Joe. Honest I am."

"That's a start," Joe said, with a grim laugh. "Well, I've got a surprise for you, too." He told the startled Randy about Carol, as briefly as possible, and then went to the grocery store.

The money stretched over staples, with a little to spare, and Joe decided to get some tobacco. It'd be the last for awhile. But then he saw some lemon drops, and got some for Carol, skipping the tobacco. For the first time in his life, he wished he could buy something nice for a girl. He had seen Carol scared and he had seen her prim and reserved, but he had never seen her smiling.

Suddenly, it seemed an important thing. He swore at his foolishness and tucked the candy in his shirt pocket.

CAROL and Randy were polite, but they watched each other with plain distrust, even when the days changed to a week, and the weeks passed into a month. When Carol had passed around the lemon drops, Randy's eyes had gibed a question at Joe, but he didn't say anything. Carol took over the housework and cooking and laundry, but she never dropped that wary, suspicious manner that irritated Joe to the edge of rudeness. The men fixed fence and chased down a few horses, but the wild droves were almost gone, and Joe knew they had to settle to raising tame stock.

"It'd give us a start," he said to Randy one day, "if we could breed some mares to that stallion of Blount's. He offered to let us have stud service and pay him the fee after we sold the colts."

Randy swung round, a pinched whiteness at the curve of his nostrils. "The day you take favors from Blount is the day I head for Canada!"

"It was just a thought," Joe said, but a huge weariness was building up in him.

Randy wouldn't or couldn't change the way he looked at things. Sure, he had worked like the devil since that scene in the hotel room, and he had never once hinted at going to town. But the wildness grew in him till Joe could almost see it burning out Randy's good nature and fun and hope.

Then, freakishly as a norther, Randy's mood changed. He began laughing and he joked at everything. He flirted with Carol and made her dance with him evenings and, a few times, he took her horseback riding. Gay and charming, he melted Carol's reserve, and they teased and pranked till Joe felt old and dried up.

He was finding out he loved Carol. So he couldn't be really glad that she and Randy had warmed from enemies into friends. With growing dread, Joe wondered how long it'd be till the friends were lovers.

The news that there was rustling going on, especially from Prade and Blount's herds, roused Joe some, but not for long. As fall grew into winter and the first snows fell, he felt gloomier. It was no good to tell himself to stop being a dog in the manger. He was losing Carol, and he didn't like it.

Maybe that was why, when he came upon her putting milk in the well-house one morning, he nodded and would have gone on without speaking if she hadn't stopped him.

"Joe, we're out of cornmeal, and the coffee's short. I need some thread, too, we're all wearing out our clothes. Could you go to town in the next few days?"

THERE were a couple of milk cows on the ranch, and wild pigs and deer and quail that could be shot, so Joe had managed to eke out their living from what the ranch provided and what he'd got from the sale of one gentled horse to the storekeeper's wife. But he was flat broke now.

Looking at Carol, Joe felt an actual physical pain at the knowledge that he couldn't even buy her a pretty handkerchief—or groceries, for that matter.

"Carol, I'll go to town, this afternoon. But whether I come back with the stuff depends on what kind of trade I can make." His pride was bleeding, but he grinned down at her. "Let's hope someone needs a horse awful bad!"

"Oh, Joe!" He didn't know how it happened, but fierce small hands were on his shoulders. "Joe, why don't you drown me or knock Randy and me in the head? You have to carry both of us, and worry and work. It isn't fair. Why, your hair's turning gray!" Her head bent forward to his chest, and she was sobbing.

Shocked, bewildered, strangely gratified yet on the verge of laughing, Joe stroked her hair. It was the way he had known it would be, damp, soft like corn silk in a newly opened husk, clinging to his hand with a life of its own. He knew he'd always have this moment to remember, even as he put her away before he could do anything crazy.

"When you're my age, young lady," he said with mock severity, "your hair will start graying, too. And what would I do without you kids to comfort my old white head?"

She sniffed indignantly, but a smile tugged at the corners of her warm full mouth. "You can save the horse awhile," she said. With a triumphant swish, she turned and brought two crocks out of a corner of the well-house. "Butter!" she said, handing it to him. "That'll get us all we need at the store. Butter's mighty scarce around here.

Joe stared in pleased admiration. "Carol, you're not only pretty, you're smart." He started out the door with the crocks in his arms, then froze.

A half-dozen men were riding up to the house. There were Blount, Walter Prade, some of their cowboys, and Clyde Parma. Some of them carried rifles, and on Parma's tough face was a mixture of fear and spite. Joe noticed that the other men were fanned around the contractor in a kind of guard.

Carol came up behind Joe, caught a frightened breath. "What are they doing here?"

Joe handed her the crocks. "I don't know," he said grimly, "but it's not good."

His thoughts clicked like lightning. Parma bought cattle, cattle had been rustled, and Randy—Randy had started acting happy about the time the rustling had started. Randy, seeing Blount and Prade take over part of his old domain, wouldn't figure he was stealing by taking their cattle, would he?

He wouldn't, Joe thought, as he stepped out to meet the cattlemen. But everyone else would. And he's my partner, they'll think I'm in on it. Prade held his rifle across his saddle.

"Where's your partner, Chrisman?" he yelled. "We jumped him and Parma outside of town, but Farr dodged us, heading this way."

"Haven't seen him," said Joe. He glanced at Parma. The contractor's eyes looked trapped, but they held triumph.

BLOUNT cleared his throat regretfully. "Parma says you and Farr have been selling him our cattle all fall. That right, Joe?"

"We're partners," Joe drawled, though his heart was pounding in his throat. "What do you think?" For the chips were down and Randy was more than partner; he was the kid, the friend, Carol's love, and Joe's responsibility, no matter what he had done.

"We think you're a rustler," Prade said. He came down off his horse. "Come on, Chrisman. You and Parma can hang together! We'll catch Farr later."

Joe pulled free of Carol's terrified hands and started forward. He hoped the cattle-

men would be decent enough to do the hanging where she couldn't watch. Suddenly there was a streak of blond hair, and a long body shot past Joe. It was Randy. He had his Colt on the riders.

"Drop your rifles!" he said. The rifles went down. Randy stood straight, and the old pride was in him. His voice rang clear as flame. "I hear Parma's trying to get Joe in this. That's a lie! Joe never knew what I was doing or he'd have kicked me clear to town to settle up!"

"Farr's lying!" Parma screeched. "He wants to save his pal's neck!"

"No," said Randy. His voice grew curiously soft, as if he were remembering. "You remember that poker game, Blount, when I paid you Joe's money? I wanted to give it back to him and I hate your guts, and I don't call it stealing compared to what you did to me. But the money is in the bank in my name alone. I've got those slips I made you sign, Parma, for each bunch of rustled stock. They prove it was me you paid, never Joe."

Randy paused. The sun was bright on him. For a second, he looked to Joe as if he were wearing that gray captain's uniform again. For sure, he was wearing the honor. His head was up, and he laughed.

"Genlemen, I wouldn't mind hanging if the company were better. Since it isn't—Parma, hop down and get one of those rifles, or borrow a gun. Fast!"

Scrambling down, Parma caught a pistol from Blount's holster. He fired and turned. Randy's shot was second, but he kept his feet longer than Parma. When he fell, it was all at once.

Carol knelt down by Randy, but he was already dead.

"I'm sorry." It was Blount. "Farr was mighty young. I never believed you were in the deal, Joe. That poker game—I feel like this is my fault."

Joe had to look away from Randy. He couldn't see very well. "It was the war's fault and mine and his and yours, a little of everybody's." Joe stopped, but it seemed important to go on. "There was an IOU Randy wrote. I tore it up, I thought. But I guess Randy never saw it that way, he reckoned he owed it." Blount bowed his head and turned away. His men took Parma off with them, but Joe buried Randy, and Carol smoothed the earth.

Joe didn't want to talk, but as he walked behind Carol back to the house the words were jerked out of him.

"Carol— if it helps any, I'd rather they'd have got me."

She spun and her eyes blazed, full of tears, yet somehow joyful. "Joe Chrisman, you fool!"

He stared. "But—Randy! You and him—didn't you—"

"Didn't we like each other? Yes, like brother and sister, teasing and fun and laughing. I'll never forget him. But Joe, it's you I love."

She was in his arms. In a kind of dreaming flash, Joe saw a blond young man in a gray uniform grin and tear up an I. O. U.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Coming up in the next issue

A Roundup of Movie News and Views by

BOB CUMMINGS

●

Featuring a Review of 20th Century-Fox's

WHITE FEATHER

Starring

ROBERT WAGNER AND JEFFREY HUNTER

plus

A word and picture personality sketch of

KIRK DOUGLAS

"You'd better come over," Ames said. "Somebody knifed Dow."

OUTLAW FRENZY

By Sam Brant

CASH CRONIN'S outlaw friends had kidnaped Judge Lansing's eleven-year-old son Billy, and were holding him as a hostage. According to the note they had sent the judge, the boy would be killed unless the jury trying Cronin for murder brought in a verdict of not guilty.

Renner, the town marshal, told Deputy Sheriff Jim Tyler about it when Jim returned early that evening from settling a boundary squabble south of town.

Jim said, "When did all this happen?"

"This afternoon. The judge had just adjourned court when Drury came with the envelope that somebody had left at the post office. Natalie was there when her pa read it in his chambers. It sure knocked her for a loop."

"What happened after that?"

"Well, we all looked for the boy, but he was gone. It seems he rode out to the Circle-Y this morning to visit with Brandon's kids. Harvey checked and learned Billy left there around two. Even on that pony of his, he

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JUDGE LANSING'S iron-clad integrity had never been shaken . . . till his son's life hung on his decision

should've been back by three at the latest."

"Where's Harvey now?" Jim asked. Harvey was sheriff.

"He's out scouting around," Renner said. "He said to tell you he might not get back till late."

"Who gave Drury the envelope?"

Renner made a face. "He said that, with the excitement of the trial and all, he's been too busy to notice much of anything. Said the fellow just handed him the envelope, told him to deliver it right away to Judge Lansing, and walked out."

"Drury never could see a foot past his nose," Jim said disgustedly. He looked out the office window and saw a figure slouched against an awning post in front of the saloon across the street. "I see you let Minor Dow out," he said.

Renner made a sound of disgust. "Let him go this morning. I figured five days in a cell would keep him sober for a time, but he's been hitting the bottle all afternoon. Got himself a new hat and a new pair of boots, too. I wonder where he got the money?"

Jim shrugged, as though he didn't care one way or the other. "How'd the judge take it?"

"You know the judge. He never lets a man know what he thinks or feels." Renner grinned faintly. "Or does he?"

JIM knew what was meant, but he pretended not to notice. The judge was a harsh man, a stickler for law and dignity. And Jim guessed the judge's plans for his children didn't include this town—not as far as Natalie was concerned, anyhow. Though he'd never said it in so many words, Judge Lansing had made it pretty plain all along that he could do without a deputy sheriff for a son-in-law.

"Anyone talked to Cronin?"

Renner nodded. "Harvey had a few things to say to him before he went out. Don't know if it did him any good, though. But I have a notion Cronin knows which way the wind's blowing. At the trial yesterday he was wary as a cat, but right now he's acting mighty smug."

Jim frowned. "How would he know? Harvey wouldn't have told him right out, and he hasn't had any visitors since we locked him up—only the lawyer, and he's all right."

"I know it. But maybe those boys figured it all out before they staged the holdup."

"That's not likely."

"Maybe not," Renner said, "but you want to remember that so far he's refused to implicate the rest of his gang, even though that might save his neck. If he'd do that—and take a chance on a life sentence—we'd at least know who to look for and where to find them. The way it stands now, those other three outlaws could be any of the dozens of strangers in town."

"I guess so," Jim said. "Well, I might talk to Cronin later on, but right now I'd like to hear what the judge has to say."

"Be just like him to put the law before his son," Renner said. "He'd better make up his mind, though. The jury heard the last of the arguments today, and you can bet they won't be out long after they get their instructions."

"That's for sure," Jim said.

Minor Dow was still slouched against the awning post when Jim came outside. He made a pretense of looking across the street, then hawked and spat and turned to enter the saloon. He was a fleshy man, all nerves and shifty eyes when sober, loud and arrogant while drunk.

He was, as Harvey had said once, "A would-be badman who needed a really desperate character to lean on." Jim forgot Minor Dow as he rode along the street toward the judge's brick house.

Grabbing little Billy was a hell of a note. Jim thought a lot of the boy, and had spent many an afternoon fishing with him at Willow Creek. Would the outlaws really kill him? Jim wondered. They might. Including Cash Cronin, there had been four in the gang. They had held up the Caribou stage. Cronin had killed the shotgun guard. Then they had taken the Consolidated Mine payroll from the boot and had started to ride away.

But Cronin's shot had drawn a bunch of Circle-Y riders on their way to town. Trask, the stage driver, had heard them, and it gave him the courage to fire at the departing outlaws. His bullet had knocked Cash Cronin

out of the saddle, and the other three had taken off as fast as their horses could carry them.

That was about the size of it, except that Cronin had suffered nothing worse than a creased skull. Trask and two passengers identified him at the trial. It was open and shut, and everyone expected him to end up stretching rope.

The rest of the outlaws had vanished, and Cronin had refused to name them. According to him, he'd been riding innocently down the road by his lonesome when Trask's bullet stopped him. All this made Jim wonder if perhaps Renner hadn't been right in saying the outlaws might have planned in advance to snatch the boy in case one of them were captured.

He doubted it, though; it didn't seem likely that men of Cronin's breed worried about what might go wrong. So that meant the rest of the outlaws had thought up the idea of grabbing the boy in order to get their leader out of jail. It was hard to say.

TYING his horse at the picket fence, Jim went up the walk. Lamplight shone through the parlor window. Natalie answered his knock right away. She was a slender girl with the energy of a young animal, a full, firm mouth, and dark eyes.

"I came as soon as I heard," he said, and she made a sort of moaning sound and came into his arms. Her body was taut at first, but after a while she relaxed and he pulled her head against his chest. The warmth of her swept over him. Then, as though out of need, or perhaps to escape the echo of disaster, she lifted her face and kissed him fiercely on the mouth.

After a moment she said, "What are we to do, Jim?"

He led her into the parlor, wishing this were not a time of trouble but only of pleasure. She was eighteen, he twenty-two, and the words she had just spoken had somehow hung between them from the day they fell in love.

He held her shoulders and looked down into her face. "How's your dad taking it?"

"He's been in his study since he came home. He didn't even come out for supper. It's as though he's fighting something inside himself, and I can't talk to him."

"All he has to do is lock himself up with the jury tonight or in the morning and tell them what happened. All those men know Billy, and you can bet they'll set Cronin free." He frowned. "They know about it already, do you suppose?"

"No. Dad told Harvey and Renner not to tell anyone but you."

Jim narrowed his eyes and turned away. What she'd told him made him wonder if the judge meant to keep the news of Billy from the jury. As Renner had said, "To put the law before his son." But how could a man do that and live with himself?

"You think I should go in and see him?"

"It can't do any harm."

Jim guessed it wouldn't, but he also wondered if it would do any good. He went to the study door, rapped and heard the judge's sharp voice. So he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Judge Lansing sat at his desk in the light of a green-shaded lamp. He was poring over a sheaf of official papers as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He was a slender man in his middle forties, with a stubborn jaw and eyes that could cut and probe. His hair was white. He looked up suddenly and stared at Jim, his lips tight together.

"Well?" he said coldly.

"I thought I'd talk to you about what happened, sir," Jim said. "I mean, as to what you plan to do about it."

"Isn't that my business?"

A little anger flared through Jim as he crossed to the desk. He had often tried to get through to this man, but had never gotten past the cold formality. He felt himself getting out of hand, but he managed to keep his voice calm as he said, "Not entirely, sir."

The judge's eyes hardened. "What's that?"

"It's Nat's business, too," Jim said. "She's pretty upset."

"I believe my daughter to be quite capable of expressing her own feelings on this subject," the judge said coldly.

Jim reddened. "Billy's your son and you haven't the right to keep quiet about this."

"What gives you the idea that I will keep quiet about it?"

Jim swallowed. "I'm sorry, sir."

"You young people take a great deal for granted, and your decisions come easily, don't they?"

The judge spoke softly, but his expression was hard. He looked at Jim out of eyes that somehow reflected all the men he had ever judged from his bench, and the integrity that had been his as he judged them. It came to Jim how harshly the man must have dealt with himself all through the years in order to keep that integrity. A chill smile touched the lips now, and there was a hint of sadness in the eyes.

"I expect to talk to the jury in the morning before court convenes. I hope that eases your mind, deputy. Was there anything else?"

Jim blinked, for he realized suddenly that once the judge used this time of personal trouble to sway the jury, he would lose his integrity and would resign his office. It seemed to him this thought flashed between them.

He said in a low voice, "Nothing else, sir," and left the room.

NATALIE gave him an anxious look. "What did he say?"

"He's going to tell the jury about Billy."

"It must be awful for him."

"They're hitting him from two sides."

She sighed. "I guess we have a lot to learn."

"I guess we do at that," Jim said.

Riding back to town, Jim knew he was more worried about Billy than he'd at first realized. Once the judge spoke to the jury, there was no doubt that Cash Cronin would go free. But what about little Billy? Would the outlaws let the boy go, knowing he could identify them?

And Jim was still puzzled as to how and when the outlaws had planned to kidnap Billy. It was disconcerting to think about. As Jim tied his horse at the hitch rack, he heard the sound of boisterous laughter from the saloon. It sounded like Minor Dow.

As Jim entered the office, Renner rose from the desk, saying, "I'll make my rounds now."

Jim nodded and yawned. Something was nagging him, but he couldn't pin it down. Since there was always the chance that Cash Cronin's gang might try to break him out of jail, Jim and Harvey had taken turns guarding the outlaw at night. By now tiredness covered Jim like a soggy blanket.

He stretched his lanky frame, yawned again, and went on back through the inner door. There were four cells, two on either side of a stone corridor, from the ceiling of which a lamp hung. Three of the cells were empty. Jim stood in front of the first cell and saw Cash Cronin on the bunk, smoking a cigarette.

Cronin grinned. "How's it going, sonny?" He was a big man with a tough, leathery face and pale blue eyes heartless as a cat's. There was a little show of jaunty arrogance about him as he sat up and crossed his booted ankles.

Jim studied the outlaw. There was no doubt about it: Cronin had been worried sick the first day of his trial, but now there was something so wickedly smug about him that Jim felt a flare of resentment.

"I never thought a man could fall so low as to use a little kid," he said. "When did you plan to grab him?"

The outlaw narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

"It seems to me I ought to be able to figure it out," Jim said slowly. "You couldn't have talked to those boys of yours, on account of there's no window in your cell. Or didn't you need to talk to them?"

Cronin flipped the butt of his smoke on the floor. "What're you getting at?" he said, as though he wanted to know.

"You must have the Indian sign on those boys of yours," Jim said. "Seems to me they'd be tickled to have you out of the way. Give 'em an extra share of that payroll to split between them."

The outlaw grinned. He leaned his head back and commenced to whistle softly. No, there was no way to make him talk, Jim thought. The fellow's life was at stake. As things stood he had a chance, and he was playing it for all he was worth.

It was frustrating. Jim said angrily, "All

right, Cronin. But if Billy ends up hurt I'll be after you. Just remember that."

Cronin gave one single whoop of laughter, and his face lit up. Jim cursed himself. He'd as much as told the outlaw that he would go free. You'd better learn to control that mouth of yours, he told himself, and went back to the office.

HE SAT at the desk, wishing he could pin down what it was that continued to nag him. Natalie came a few minutes later with a covered plate and a small jug of coffee.

"I thought you'd be hungry after being out all day, and that you might not have had a chance to eat."

"I haven't thought of eating," Jim said. "What did you bring?" He lifted the white napkin from the plate.

"I baked an apple pie this morning." She smiled at him and then leaned over and kissed him.

He ate the pie and drank the coffee, and she watched him with a glow in her eyes. As he finished the last bite of flaky pie crust, there came a shout from outside. Then the door burst open and Ames, the bartender from the saloon across the street, stumbled inside.

He said, "You'd better come on over. Somebody knifed Minor Dow."

Jim groaned. All of a sudden he had the answer to what had puzzled him, and now maybe he was too late. "Where is he?"

"In the alley."

They went across the street and on through the saloon, Ames explaining what had happened. "He'd been drinking all evening, getting pretty loud and bothering everyone the way he did. Last I saw of him, he and this feller were heading for one of the back rooms with a bottle."

"What fellow?"

"I'm not sure, Jim. I only got a glimpse of his back. But I went to the room after a while to see what was going on, and it was empty. So I looked out in the alley, on account of Dow hadn't paid for the bottle. And since he had a roll on him, I figured I better get it before he spent it all."

"You mean he had a lot of money on him?"

"About fifty dollars," Ames said. "He was flashing it around like it was all the money in the world, and making out there was more where it came from."

There was quite a crowd in the alley, and two or three men held lanterns. One look at Minor Dow's slack face told Jim the man was dead. He searched the body, but the money was gone.

"That isn't surprising," Ames said dryly. "I've seen men killed for less than fifty dollars."

Jim scarcely heard him. Renner came up and took over, and Jim slipped through the crowd and back to the street to his horse. Dow's death almost proved what he'd been thinking since hearing about the knifing. For Dow had spent time in a cell across from Cash Cronin, and it was a good bet the outlaw had talked him into contacting the rest of the gang. Where else could Dow have gotten the money to buy a new hat and boots and have plenty left for liquor?

Jim knew now it had been this that had bothered him, for Dow had always been a man who splurged on others. Renner'd said Dow must have stolen the money, but Jim didn't think he had the guts, especially after being sober for five days. But he could've had the guts to deliver a message for Cronin on the promise of immediate payment.

On the other hand, a man needed to spend no more than five minutes with a fellow like Minor Dow to realize what he was, and so the outlaws hadn't quite trusted him. Perhaps one of them had come to town to keep an eye on Dow, who had started to brag and flash his roll as the liquor took hold. And since one wrong word could queer their plans, this outlaw had talked Dow into stepping outside.

He had used a knife to kill Dow, because a gun made noise. They would probably have killed him in the end regardless, Jim thought, as he swung into the saddle.

THE Circle-Y was north of town, so Jim rode that way. He stopped at the livery stable at the last cross street, hoping he was right. For Dow, who hadn't owned a saddle, let alone a horse, would've had to rent a mount in order to leave town.

Gravem, the hostler, was cleaning his runway with a big wooden rake in the light of the lantern that hung from a rafter. He nodded slowly at Jim's question.

"He came in around ten. Didn't have any money on him, but I let him have a horse because he promised to come back later and pay. He did, too."

"How long was he gone?"

Gravem pursed his lips. "Not quite an hour."

"You know which way he went?"

Gravem gave a wave of his hand. "North."

Excitement tugged at Jim as he rode out of town at a gallop. But then he slowed down, remembering what the judge had said about young people coming to quick decisions. Dow had been gone about an hour. Figure twenty minutes coming and going, Jim thought. And the rest of the time spent contacting and talking to the outlaws. Now where was there a place twenty minutes from town where they could be holed up?

Minor Dow would hardly have ridden a livery stable nag at a gallop so, after looking at his watch, Jim went on at a trot. He shaped a map of the country in his mind. West of the road it was flat for a good many miles, while eastward lay a tangle of wooded foothills. That's where they would be, Jim thought. He knew of two abandoned mines up in there. One was a good hour's ride distant, so that wouldn't be it. But the other one. . . .

He had to strike a match to look at his watch; ten minutes on the way. That was it, all right. An old wagon trail, the ruts weeded over, branched into the hills above Pebble Creek. Excitement goaded Jim, and he was within five minutes of the mine before he pulled rein.

He wanted to, but had no business, going it alone; little Billy's life was at stake. There were two outlaws up there, perhaps three, and the best bet was to gather a posse and surround them. Still, they might not be up there at all, and there was no reason why he shouldn't scout around first and find out.

Then, too, the sudden thought of Harvey goaded him. The sheriff was no fool, and would certainly have checked both the abandoned mines. What had happened to him?

From where he sat his horse on the slope above the creek, Jim could see the black shapes of the hills rising before him. He rode ahead to where the old road started to turn past a gaunt shoulder the height of a house. Something, the sound of dirt sliding, warned him. He half turned in the saddle, just in time to avoid the full weight of the man who jumped him from the bank. He saw the flash of a knife and felt a sharp pain in his chest, and then he tumbled from the saddle as his horse jumped forward.

He hit the ground on his back, all the breath driven out of him. He was conscious of the man jumping at him, and he instinctively lashed out with his feet. The man grunted as a boot heel smashed into his knee. Jim spun around and reached for his gun. But then it came to him that a shot would warn those at the mine.

The man closed in at a crouch. "Go ahead, shoot," he said hoarsely. "But if you do they'll kill the kid and run for it."

As the man leaped forward, Jim threw the gun with all his strength. The fellow grunted as the heavy weight struck his chest. Jim drove into him, grabbed his wrist, and twisted. His other fist smashed into the man's face. Jim hit him again and the fellow's knees buckled, the knife fell from his hand. Another blow sent him reeling to the ground.

JIM stood there a second, breathing heavily. Then he picked up his gun and the knife. He put a hand inside his shirt and felt of his chest. It's nothing, he thought, just a cut. He stepped forward and lifted the gun from the fellow's holster. He had to make sure about this.

"Where've you got the boy?"

The man made a gruff sound and said nothing. Jim slapped him heavily in the face. His left hand gripping the nape of the man's neck, he slapped him three times. The man blubbered.

"Where is he?"

"In that shack about a hundred yards above the mine."

"Is he hurt?"

"No, I swear it. Neither one of 'em is hurt."

"What do you mean, neither one of them?" Jim asked harshly.

"The sheriff. He came up there just about dark, and we threw down on him."

So they had Harvey, too. The two outlaws up there would be getting restless. Jim thought again of returning to town after a posse, then decided it would take too long and rouse too much excitement.

Jim knocked his prisoner out, got a rope from the saddle, and tied the outlaw securely to a tree. Then he tied his horse and went ahead on foot. When he reached the first pile of tailing below the tunnel, he took off his boots and went on again.

There was no light in the shack, and that was understandable. Jim studied it briefly from behind a mound of tailing. Then his eyes sharpened. He saw the tiny glow of what could only be a cigarette. He waited a while to make sure, before working his way around to the back of the shack. He edged slowly along the log wall, gun in hand, his stockinged feet making no noise.

Then he heard the mutter of voices. He came cautiously to the corner of the shack and saw two men sitting on the stoop.

Jim stepped into sight. "Reach!" he said.

For a second the two men stared at him. Then the one on the far side grunted and dove backwards into the shack. Jim fired twice, and the man lay half across the sill. His boot heels hammered the stoop. There was the sound of agonized breath, then silence. The second man raised his hands above his head.

"Is there a lamp in there?" Jim asked.

"Yeah," the man said.

"Turn around."

Jim lifted the man's gun. He used the gun to knock the man out, then went inside and struck a match. The lamp was on the table. As its glow brightened, Jim saw the two bound and gagged figures against the wall, and he went over to them.

THE judge insisted that Jim stay for a late snack that evening. He wouldn't take no for an answer. For the first time that Jim could remember, the judge smiled and was friendly.

"That was quick thinking on your part, Jim. And bad judgment on the part of Cash Cronin."

"He didn't have much choice," Jim said. He remembered the look of panic on Cronin's face when he and Harvey locked the two outlaws in the cells across the corridor. The third outlaw was dead and the payroll had been recovered. "He sure didn't look very smug when we brought those boys in."

Billy, more excited than frightened, had been sent to bed after he told what had happened to him. As it turned out, Minor Dow had kept an eye on the judge's house from the time Renner turned him loose. And Dow had spoken to Billy as the boy left town for the Circle-Y, asking where he was going. Dow then contacted the outlaws and gave them Cash Cronin's message, and they paid Dow a hundred dollars. Then they had waited for Billy to return and had grabbed him.

"Billy sure took it all right," Jim said.

"I'm certainly proud of that boy," the judge said. "And I guess you know I'm proud of you, too, Jim." He glanced at his daughter, then looked back at Jim. "Have you given much thought to your future?"

That as good as made him a member of the family, Jim thought. "I've thought some of ranching, if I ever get enough money together."

The judge mused on this. "Have you ever considered doing law work? In four or five years you should be ready to pass the bar examinations."

Jim sighed. "That's a long time, sir."

"I understand," the judge said dryly. "But then I've never heard of any law against a married man's studying at night. And you might even end up on the bench."

Jim grinned, and winked at Natalie. "How would you like to be the wife of a judge?"

"I'd like it fine," Natalie said.

"Judge Tyler," Jim murmured. "It might be a long time coming, but there's no reason why I can't make it. Where are those law books, Mr. Lansing?"

a true story

Hell in the Rockies

by Norman B. Wiltsey

WINTER came early to the Colorado high country in the fall of 1848. Snow blanketed the Rockies in October, and the mercury hid in the little glass bowl at the bottom of the white man's thermometer.

Cringing before the icy blast of the Cold-Maker, Ute warriors retired to their buffalo-skin lodges to smoke endless pipes of *kinnikinick* and dream of summer warpaths and hunting trails. Freighters and traders and the few remaining mountain men holed up at forts and settlements to drink and gamble and swap tall yarns until spring.

In all that austere region bordering upon the Sangre de Cristo and San Juan Ranges, white men and red were immobilized by frost and cold and piercing winds. And into that grim country, in late November, marched famed explorer John Charles Fremont.

The renowned Pathfinder was seeking a route for a transcontinental railroad along the 38th parallel of north latitude, through the snow-choked Rockies. To Fremont's feverishly ambitious mind, the perilous winter trek through the mountains was necessary to prove to skeptical government officials in

Washington that the proposed railroad could be operated twelve months of the year.

At The Pueblo—a settlement of old-time mountain men above Bent's Fort on the Arkansas—Fremont found Old Bill Williams contendly sucking his blackened clay pipe and nursing a lame arm. He had been wounded some months previously in a ruckus with hostile Indians. Old Bill was comfortable at The Pueblo. There he was sure of three square meals a day and enough Taos lightning whisky to ease the ache in his injured arm.

At first the sixty-year-old trapper refused to listen to Fremont's crack-brained proposition to guide his expedition across the mountains. But eventually the Pathfinder's offer of generous payment in gold coin changed the trapper's mind. The glorious high-rolling days of the fur trade were far in the past, and Old Bill's tattered "possible sack" was pathetically empty of cash. Ignoring the warning voice of his own better judgment, the venerable mountain man agreed to lead Fremont across the Continental Divide.

Fremont's foolhardy undertaking was doomed to tragic failure from the moment his expedition entered the foothills of the towering ranges. The rolling approaches to the Sangre de Cristos lay ten feet deep in snow, and the sharp white peaks glittered with an ominous brillance. Snow plumes, streaming from their awesome pinnacles like silver smoke in the icy sunlight, were a sight to chill the marrow in a sensible man's bones.

UNFORTUNATELY, the only sensible man in Fremont's entire outfit was Bill Williams—and the glory-chasing Pathfinder haughtily refused Old Bill's cautious counsel. Knowing the formidable character of the country straight ahead, Williams strongly advised cutting northwest and crossing the Divide by way of Cochetopa Pass. Fremont curtly vetoed the mountain man's suggestion, and ordered Bill to strike straight through the Sangre de Cristos by way of Robideau Pass. Williams shrugged philosophically and obeyed.

A blizzard swooped down upon them, and the temperature dropped far below the zero mark. There was no trail once they entered the mountains. In the smothering swirl of white, the usually sure-footed pack mules slipped off the narrow ledges, carrying with them to destruction most of the expedition's precious food supply. What mules remained had to be roped together to save the rest of the provisions from disappearing over the cliffs.

The ceaseless gale pounded the snow into a mass so solid that axes and mauls had to be used to carve out a trail. Yet, incredibly, the expedition struggled over Robideau Pass and reached desolate San Luis Valley on December 11th. Here Fremont called a halt in a storm-swept gulch. Dazed with fatigue, the men dug holes in the snow and crouched in them, beside blazing fires.

Most of them wanted to turn back, or at least try another route. Bill Williams was their spokesman.

"It's no use, Colonel," declared Bill courteously using Fremont's old Army title. "The San Juans are before us now, and we just can't get over 'em, the shape we're in. All the food's gone but a few pounds of mule meat. Four men are frost-bitten bad, and three others are snow-blind. Best things to do now is head south around the San Juans. The snow won't be near so deep there, nor the weather so cold. That way we might still make it. This way we'll sure as hell go under!"

Fremont's haggard eyes burned darkly in his bearded ice-crusted face. "You forget yourself Williams! *I* am in command of this expedition, not you. We will proceed straight over the mountain. Kill another mule tonight and feed the men. We will move on at daybreak!"

Old Bill slowly rubbed his bad left arm with his mittened right hand. "Not with *me* guiding you, Colonel! I know when I'm licked—and this is it. Get yourself another guide if you aim to tackle the peaks up there."

Fremont snapped harshly, "Very well, Williams. Alex Godey will assume your duties at once. Your friend Kit Carson will hear of your cowardice, the moment I reach Taos!"

Williams didn't reply. He dug a hunk of frozen mule meat out of his pack, carefully impaled it on the point of his knife, and held it over the fire, grave determination in his eyes.

TRUE to his word, Fremont had his men moving at daybreak. Alex Godey led the way through the dismal gray dawn, straight toward the looming San Juan peaks. Snow fell for the tenth consecutive day—steadily, heavily, remorselessly. The drifts were now so deep that only the tops of the scrubby pine trees showed above them. The corn was all gone, and the starving mules took to gnawing their rawhide pack-saddles and chewing each other's manes and tails. They made the long nights hideous with their incessant mournful braying.

Time blurred into a meaningless succession of tortured hours spent pushing numbly into a flying wall of powdered snow, or huddling miserably around small deadwood campfires. Nearly all the men had frozen ears or fingers and toes; daily, more and more of them went snow-blind. Still the "Peerless Pathfinder" drove stubbornly on.

On December 17th Godey steered them into a steep-walled box canyon from which there appeared to be no visible means of advancing. Even Fremont, afire with impatience to cross the mountains and report his triumph to Washington, had to admit defeat and call upon Bill Williams to extricate the expedition from its desperate situation.

Weary Old Bill decided that their best chance of getting out alive lay in packing in supplies from Taos, one hundred and sixty miles away. Fremont concurred, declaring that Bill should be able to complete the round trip in sixteen days.

Williams shook his shaggy head at this, but said nothing. Carefully he picked three men to accompany him on the stupendous journey. Fremont and the rest of the party would follow Bill's hurriedly marked trail as fast as the weakest members could travel.

With a chunk of mule meat, a pound of sugar, and a few tallow candles for food, Bill Williams and his three companions started for Taos. Only the old mountain man realized the tremendous odds against them, and he kept the grim knowledge to himself.

After three days of steady traveling they hit the Rio Grande, foodless and light-headed from hunger. For two frightful weeks the four men struggled on toward Taos, living on scraps of leather, cut from their belts and buckskin shirts and boiled into a gluey soup.

No living bird or animal showed itself in all that wide white desolation. Once Bill found a dead otter along a creek, and they feasted around their campfire. But the energy supplied by the otter didn't last long. A man named Jack King played out first, and dropped unconscious in the snow.

Bill and his surviving two comrades could do nothing for poor King, and so after a while they left him to die alone in the vast silence. They had to go on, for somewhere in the appalling wastes behind them thirty men depended on them for food and for life itself.

Creutzfeldt gave out next. The big Dutchman's lips were frozen so badly he couldn't talk, but he indicated by gestures that he wanted Williams and Tom Breckenridge to go on and leave him where he had collapsed. They found it hard to do. Creutzfeldt made no sound of entreaty, yet the blue eyes in his yellow-bearded face were the eyes of a faithful dog left to die by the side of the trail.

Looking back at the deserted Dutchman, Bill Williams came to a decision. "I can't leave him, Tom," Bill said. "He's conscious, and looking at me. I'd never sleep again if I left him now. You go on, and I'll stay with Dutch until he goes under. Won't be long, anyhow."

Williams returned to Creutzfeld, and Breckenridge went on. Half a mile away, Breckenridge jumped a deer and dropped him with a single ball from his rifle. An hour later he staggered back to his comrades with a backload of venison. Creutzfeld ate and slept, and was saved.

FREMONT, with the strongest men in his party, overtook Williams, Creutzfeld, and Breckenridge the next morning. The Pathfinder looked them over coldly and continued on his way, leaving them to crawl and stumble the remaining forty-odd miles to Taos as best they could. On stiff and frozen feet, babbling in wild delirium, Bill and his mates crept into Taos five days after Fremont's arrival there.

Recuperating at Kit Carson's comfortable adobe house in Taos, Fremont had nothing but violent abuse for Bill Williams. He claimed that Bill had first misled him, and

then failed miserably in his mission of bringing back supplies when the expedition was starving in the mountains.

Writing to his wife in Washington, Fremont declared flatly that the "error of my mountain journey was in engaging this man." (Williams). "He proved never to have in the least known, or entirely to have forgotten, the whole region of country through which we were to pass." This in reference to a man who had spent thirty years crossing and recrossing the Rocky Mountains from end to end and back again!

Kit Carson knew better, and so did all the old mountain men in Taos. Fremont was passing the buck, trying to shift the onus of failure from himself to Bill Williams. There was also an awkward matter of explaining why he, the great Trail Blazer, had sent Alex Godey back into the mountains to rescue the exhausted members of the expedition, while their famous leader toasted his shins and drank hot chocolate in front of Kit Carson's fireplace.

Godey found eleven men, of the original company of thirty-two, dead in the snow. All the others, snow-blind and helpless, lay huddled around the embers of a dying campfire, stoically waiting for death.

Fremont didn't linger long in Taos after Godey's return from the mountains. Before winter's end the handsome pride of Washington society was off to California and new adventures.

In stony silence the mountain men watched him depart.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. One of the following was a famous mountain man and scout, one a trail driver, one a law officer. You pick 'em out: Jim Bridger, George W. Saunders, Bill Tighlman.

2. "*Buenos días!*" familiar greeting in southwestern cow country, means "good morning," "good day" or "good gracious?"

3. The "hottest" area in the U.S. for uranium prospecting is the canyon-cut country around where Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico corner together. Is this area called the Colorado Plateau, the Moab Mesa or the Bluff Basin?

4. The famous poem "Out Where the West Begins" was written by a Denver newspaper reporter whose first name was Arthur. What was his last name?

5. What is the correct name of the delicious little pine nut gathered by native Spanish-Americans and Navajo Indians of Arizona and New Mexico?

6. On March 11, 1884, gunfighters Ben Thompson and King Fisher where killed in the Jack Harris Variety Theater in what very old Texas town?

7. Both used as riding whips, what is thedifference between a quirt and a *ramal*, some-times spelled *romal?*

8. Conrad Hilton, probably owner of more hotels than any other man alive, was born in a little *placita* called San Antonio, in what Territory? (Not Texas.)

9. Which is the larger "wild cat," the cougar or the lynx?

10. This wood takes a high glossy finish without varnish, it grows in Oregon and its name is also a common girl's name beginning with "m." What is it?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

"He's dead, all right," the sheriff said. "Who killed him?"

FULL SUNRISE

By Dorothy Roseborough

ARVINTA HARRIS knew she would never forget that dreadful morning on the trail to California. Even now, after two months, the whole horrible sight came back in her dreams.

There was little Johnny, high and proud on the driver's seat above the mules, and Mrs. Hales beside him. She saw again the sudden starting plunge of the team, and Johnny pitching over the wheel, and his mother reaching out too late to save him, too far to save herself.

Back in Illinois, orphan Arvinta had worked for the Hales as cook and as nursemaid for Johnny. When they decided to take the trail for the gold fields Mrs. Hales wanted her to go with them, and Arvinta said she would love to, if her brother Dexter could come along too.

She had loved Mrs. Hales. And now she

YOUNG ARVINTA HARRIS needed a man's protection . . . but she didn't dare be nice to the one man who could help her

struggled to shut her memory against the sight of the great crushing wagon wheels, which seemed to turn in a nightmare of slowness although it had all happened in a flash of time. She tried to forget how young Jim Bowles rushed to check the mules; she deadened her ears to the remembered horror of shrieks, cut short as the wagon pitched and rumbled behind the runaway team.

She was thankful that Dexter had not seen it happen. But in her own dreams the screams didn't stop, the wheels kept on turning, and Jim Bowles kept on running. Usually Mr. Hales would come to her wagon and slap her awake, and then Arvinta would know that the screams were her own.

Mr. Hales didn't have much patience with her at the best of times. Perhaps, Arvinta thought, her nightmare cries reminded him too vividly of the runaway, for he had started the mules with a cut of the whip and without warning. And, though he didn't care much for anyone but himself, he had been fond of Johnny.

There was a preacher with the wagon train, and he tried to comfort Arvinta. "It was the Lord's will, and who are we to question Him? They suffered but a minute, my dear, and now are at rest together."

"That's right," she retorted bitterly. "And Dexter and me—we're together, and maybe we'd be better off dead, too. There's nothing for us with Mr. Hales. He's always hated Dexter because of the boy's crippled foot. And he only wants me as a pack mule and a cook."

The white-haired old man looked grave. "That's not a Christian way to talk. Mr. Hales is somewhat harsh—we've all noticed that. But bow your head to his discipline, Arvinta. It's given you to bear. It's all part of your life's plan."

Arvinta clenched her fists. "If it's also part of the plan for Mr. Hales to pick on Dexter, I don't hold with it. And I'm going to do all I can to put a stop to it."

SHOCKED, the old preacher repeated the rebellious words to the women of the caravan, and after that they refused to have anything to do with her. But Arvinta and her brother didn't mind. They got along.

Dexter was twelve, and since his foot had been crippled he had become kind of puny. He couldn't work like other boys any more and, although he was a good shot, he wasn't strong enough to carry the long rifle and get fresh meat for the family the way Arvinta did sometimes. But then she was going on eighteen, and stronger than she looked. Their father had taught both Dexter and her how to shoot. And their mother had been a fine cook, so Arvinta was good with both gun and skillet.

As the days went by Hales found a thousand little ways to make life a misery to Arvinta. Since his wife and boy had died the big man had been drinking even more than ever, and it seemed to make him mean. Sometimes he was too sweet to Arvinta; she hated him then. Sometimes he took out his bad temper on Dexter, and then she hated him twice as much.

"Why don't you be nice to me, Vinty?" he said one evening. "You and I could get along pretty well if you smiled at me once in a while."

Arvinta stared at him, her face stiff with dislike. She said, "I don't see a thing to smile at."

That made him mad and, as usual, he turned on Dexter. He slapped the boy lightly on the cheek. "Here's something to make you laugh."

It had been a hot day, but Arvinta felt an icy chill sweep over her. "Mr. Hales," she said, "I'd advise you not to touch Dexter again."

Hales picked up a chunk of wood and tossed it carelessly at the boy's leg. Dexter gave a sudden strangled cry, lost his balance, fell, and lay hugging the twisted foot. Hales grinned, his drink-reddened face glistening with sweat.

"I figure that's funny enough to laugh about. Here's a kid twelve years old, and he can't keep on his feet. Maybe he just needs stirring up a bit."

He poked the boy with his heavy boot. Arvinta thought, just a little more and that would be a kick. She felt a sickness of anger and disgust; it was as if a rattlesnake had coiled itself round her naked ankle. Looking about desperately, she saw the hooked iron

used to push embers together and lift the cover of the dutch oven. It lay with the hook in the camp fire, and it was black-hot, with the metallic irridescence that comes before the cherry-red of sparked heat. Arvinta grabbed the iron by its twisted handle.

"The preacher told me there's a plan for our lives," she said, her voice tight with determination. "Well, Mr. Hales, maybe you'd like to know mine." He stepped back hurriedly as she advanced upon him, the iron in her hand. "You touch Dexter one more time and I'll brand you, if I have to wait till you're asleep to do it. You hear me?"

To her secret surprise, Hales slunk off to his own wagon, muttering to himself.

THERE was a rustling in the brush beside the trail. Jim Bowles stepped out and came to stand beside Arvinta. He was tall and black-haired, and his brown eyes smiled at her from a weather-tanned face.

"What happened?" he asked, and knelt down to examine Dexter's foot. "Did Hales knock you down?"

The boy shook his head. "Not—not exactly."

"It was really my fault," Arvinta broke in. "I can't be decent to that man. I can't even stand to look at him since he's been drinking so much." She added wryly, "And here I'm bound to cook and do for him all the way to California."

"Why don't you quit him?"

"How can I? It's our only way to get there now. And who'd take in the two of us? Besides—" she hesitated—"I must. I promised Mrs. Hales I'd drive the light wagon and work for our passage. I can't break my word."

Jim laughed. "I heard you threaten to brand him. Seems to me a time comes when a promise is better broken."

He helped Dexter to rise, and they stood with their arms intertwined until the boy was sure of his footing. For an instant Arvinta felt the spring of delight in her heart which women know when they see a man who is tender with a child. Then Jim spoke again and the spell was broken.

"Watch out for Hales, Vinty. I guess I don't have to tell you that."

She nodded, feeling her cheeks grow hot, and he added, "I'll kind of keep an eye on Dexter. We don't want our friend to get too high-handed with him. From now on I'll ride near your wagon."

Arvinta said stiffly, "Thank you, but you've no call to do that. I'm sure I really scared him this time."

Bowles grinned. "If you'd threatened to brand me I'd have run a mile. But the way I see it, a drunken man doesn't have enough sense to stay scared. You may need some help, and I'd be proud to give it."

"Thank you," Arvinta repeated, "Dexter and I can manage very well."

Bowles reddened, but he said no more, just touched his hat and went back to the family he was traveling with. Arvinta knew he was hurt, but she didn't want him around. Jim was young and nice-looking. To have him ride near her wagon would set the women's tongues clacking, and that she could not stand. No matter what she said, though, she felt sure Jim would spread his bedroll close by every night. He was a stubborn man.

Thinking over her defiance of Hales, Arvinta suddenly discovered that her hands trembled so much it was difficult for her to clean up after the evening meal. She finished at last and sat down by the fire to rest, with Dexter lying curled up against her, half asleep.

But her uneasiness persisted. In the flickering light of the dying fire she imagined an enemy behind every bush and, no matter how she tried, she could not overcome her nervous fear of Hales. Before long she helped Dexter into the safety of the wagon, and made up his bed.

"You all right, Sis?" he asked, and Arvinta answered that she was fine.

SHE looked at the two guns that had belonged to their father—one the long rifle she used for hunting, the other smaller and not quite as accurate, which officially belonged to Dexter. They were kept in the usual place for guns in a trail wagon, slung under the canvas tilt where the driver could easily reach a wapon if necessary.

"Dexter," she said, "I know you can't get the small gun from where it is. I'm going to

make a sling for it, lower down, and hang it at the rear of the wagon, near your bed. Then you can get it out if there's any trouble. You could handle it all right, couldn't you?"

"Sure could," Dexter said eagerly.

She roughed up his hair affectionately. Tomorrow I'll make a sling for your gun. We'll fix it so you can shoot right from the wagon. Only promise, Dexter—no shooting unless I say so."

He promised, and any promise Dexter made, he kept. Arvinta didn't need to worry about that. A big hand-woven blanket had been hung so that it divided the wagon into two rooms; she pulled it across now, unrolled her own narrow pallet, and lay watching the pictures on the blanket move in the night breeze.

The scenes were all in deep blue on white, a repeated row of tall narrow houses on either side of a steep street, and at the end a small church with a pointed spire. Arvinta lay very still, wishing she could climb the hill to the church and find some comfort there. So wishing, she became calm again, and fell asleep listening to the sound of Dexter's steady breathing.

Early in the morning Arvinta made a sling for the light gun and hung it so that the muzzle pointed to the rear of the wagon. She left the heavy hunting rifle near the driver's seat. Satisfied that the wagon could be well defended, she went about the daily work of milking the heifer. She strained the milk into a bucket, covered it tightly, and hung it so that butter would come with the motion of the wagon. Dexter had a small fire going by then, and Arvinta started the breakfast of flapjacks and coffee.

Sleepy and unwashed, Hales came from his wagon. He nodded to Arvinta and sat down to eat. "Be quick with the packing up," he told her. "We want to make Indian Rock before night time. The captain figures on staying over a day or two so we can do some trading before moving on. Well, it sure won't hurt to rest the stock." He gave her a quick sly look. "I'm told there's always a good chance at the fort for a boy who's willing to work."

Arvinta felt a sudden tightening of attention. "What do you mean by that? There isn't anyone in the train who would let a boy go, is there?"

Hales grunted. "There's no one else in the train who has a boy like Dexter. All a cripple can do is sweep a tavern floor for his living."

ARVINTA saw fright in Dexter's eyes as he stared at the big man. She rose tensely from her place by the fire and began gathering up the tin cups and plates they had been using. "You tried to get rid of Dexter before—at Blue Creek. Mrs. Hales told me. She promised it would never happen again."

"My wife's dead," Hales said brutally. "The boy's my business now."

Rage and hatred rose within Arvinta like a sweeping tide. "Mrs. Hales is dead because you killed her with your foolishness," she said, and her voice trembled with fury.

Hales jumped to his feet. "The team startled and ran," he shouted. "It wasn't my fault."

"No, not your fault." Arvinta faced him. "Only the fault of the whisky you've been filling yourself with ever since we left home. You killed her and your boy as surely as if you'd pointed a gun at them and pulled the trigger."

He took her by the shoulders and shook her, his grip like steel. She cried out, struggling and slapping at his face, trying to get away. Dexter scrambled to his feet.

"Jim!" he screamed. "Jim Bowles!"

The young man came rushing toward them. Hales released Arvinta so suddenly that she staggered back, catching at the wagon wheel to keep herself from falling. Dazed, she stood an instant, turning in time to see Hales strike a rocking blow aimed full at Jim's face. But it hit slanting against the left cheekbone as Jim twisted, ducked, and let the momentum of his furious charge carry him into a bear hug from which neither could break with safety. At once they were surrounded by other men of the train and pulled away from each other. Their arms were gripped and held behind their backs.

"There'll be no fighting in this company," shouted the captain. "The first fellow to make another move will be roped up until we get to Indian Rock. Hales, you struck the first

blow. Jim Bowles, you carried on. That's enough, I say. That's enough. Turn 'em loose, men."

Glaring, Hales and Jim stood ready to meet another attack, although both knew it was a disgrace to break the agreement against fighting. To do so might easily endanger the whole company, and up to this day the rule had been rigidly observed. Then Jim turned away. Muttering, Hales walked back to the campfire to finish his breakfast.

Arvinta served him without speaking, but she could not control the trembling that shook her. He grinned, watching with a malicious pleasure. Mopping up the last of the blackstrap on his plate, he emptied his coffee cup and went off to bring in the stock.

There was a stirring in the camp and men and women moved briskly to get started. Looking forward to a stop at a town—a change from the monotony of the journey—lightened the spirits of the trail-weary company. Only Arvinta stood blank, unmoving. Some plates slid from her nerveless hand and made a tinny rattle against the campfire rocks. Dexter stooped awkwardly to pick them up.

"Never you mind, Vinty. We don't care what Hales says. I don't have to stay at the settlement; he can't make me. I'll run after you."

Through Arvinta's mind flashed a picture of the crippled boy limping after a far cloud of dust, and the brave words pierced her heart. She hugged him close, and the touch of his thin body gave her a new determination.

"Of course, Dexter love, we'll always be together. Always."

THEY had heard a great deal about Indian Rock. It was an old deserted fort, a trading post now, and a stopping-off place for wandering fur traders and for freighters on their way to and from New Mexico. There was a store and a smithy, and rooms could be rented by stray travelers.

Best of all, there was a fine deep well. After long days of stingying with insufficient water or even, sometimes, the foul scum-covered liquid from buffalo wallows, women in the wagon trains looked forward eagerly to a few days of washing and repairing clothes. When they took up the trail again, they were rested and refreshed.

That was the good of the place. The bad of it was the drinking and the gambling, and other things the women did not like to think about. In spite of that, they were excited at the prospect of seeing the famous old fort, buying what they lacked, and perhaps finding letters from home awaiting them.

It was evening when they reached the settlement. The last rays of the westering sun touched the adobe walls and gilded the crumbling defense towers on either side of the great gateway. A late train of freighters rolled in from the west. A blowing cloud of shifting dust followed the great wagons as they drove one by one into the enclosure, unloaded before the trading post and tavern, and then pulled out to take their place outside the walls.

Fires for the evening meals blossomed in the darkness. Arvinta followed Hales's wagon as he found a camping place as near to the entrance as possible. He unhitched the mules, drove picket pins alongside the wagon, and threw down some feed.

He said, "Too late to find good pasturage for them tonight. I'll let them graze tomorrow." He stood staring down at Arvinta as she began preparations for supper. "I don't want you in the fort tonight. There are too many fellows in with freight, and it'll be late by the time you're through."

"I wanted to buy some calico," she began, but he cut her off.

"I say no. Keep Dexter here unless I send for him. And stay in the wagon, both of you. New Mexico freighters are a wild bunch. There'll be plenty of time to see the post in the morning. I'm going over there now," he added. "You needn't make supper for me."

There was little rest for the wives that night. While the men went into the fort, the women stayed in their wagons, listening to the confused noise of shouting drinking men and watching, half-afraid, the strange smoky glare of torch lights flickering over the houses.

LATE in the evening Jim Bowles came to Arvinta, saying that he didn't like the way things were shaping up.

"There's a powerful lot of drinking going

on. Hales is stocking up on whisky, making a fool of himself, as usual," he said in disgust. "He's bragging that he's got a prettier woman in his wagon than any girl in the fort. Those freighters are easy to rile. They'd jump him at the drop of a hat." He frowned. "I should stay here with you but—I don't know —Hales is sure looking for trouble."

"Try to get him back to his wagon," Arvinta suggested, and when Jim protested that she might need protection she shook her head. "You know how he is. He'll start fighting—get hurt, maybe. That won't help me and Dexter any."

"It's all right, ma'am. He's just tied to be fit."

Jim said, "What do I care about him? It's you and the boy I'm thinking about. Arvinta, be careful. Don't let anyone into the wagon. Promise me."

With an effort she kept her voice steady. "I promise. We'll be all right."

Jim lingered an instant, but she said no more and he slipped quietly away. Watching his shadowy figure as he re-entered the fort gate, Arvinta knew that her courageous words were, after all, only words. She had despised Hales for what he was, and because of the threat he represented to Dexter's future. But now to that was added the slowly growing fear for her own safety.

Dexter's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Vinty, if any of the freighters come here I'll have my gun ready. I won't let them get in."

She managed a laugh. "Don't be afraid, honey. They aren't worse than any other men, and they've no reason to come here. Remember, you aren't fit to handle a gun unless you're mighty sure there's a good reason to shoot. So be careful what you do."

The boy was silent so long that she thought he had fallen asleep. But after a while he spoke again, and his voice was shaky with the struggle to keep back his tears.

"It isn't those other men so much—it's Hales I'm thinking about. I hate him. I wish he were dead."

Arvinta found her way to Dexter's bed at the rear of the wagon. She knelt down beside him. "You're nearly thirteen, Dexter, almost a man grown. You mustn't talk like a child." Leaning forward, she pressed her cheek against his forehead. "It's not for us to judge Hales, or any other man. Goodnight, honey. I'm going to bed now."

He clung to her, his arms tight round her neck. "Vinty, I'd feel better if you kept the curtain pulled back tonight."

"All right. I guess it won't be quite so lonely-feeling. Now go to sleep, and don't you worry. We can take care of ourselves, you and me." But even as she said the words, Arvinta wondered if she were speaking the truth.

Long after her brother was asleep she lay in the dark, listening to the din of senseless brawling that came from the fort. There's an excuse for wild beasts acting like beasts, she thought, but none for human beings. She was glad that the mules were so close to the wagon; the jingle of picket chains and the familiar sound of feeding animals calmed her uneasiness. She drifted into a deep sleep.

JUST before dawn a scuffling noise at the rear of the wagon startled her into full wakefulness. She sat up straight.

Dexter whispered urgently, "Vinty! Vinty! Someone's trying to get in."

In the dim light she saw him, kneeling on his bed, the gun in his hands. "No, no!" she exclaimed. "Wait!" And at once she was on her feet, reaching for the long rifle under the front tilt. But in her hurry and bewilderment she fumbled in releasing the weapon from the canvas sling.

She heard Dexter's voice, high-pitched, screaming at the intruder, "Get out! Get away! I'll shoot."

He was answered by a curse and a yelling laugh. The gun went off with a roar. A muffled scream came from outside. Powder fumes filled the wagon, and for an instant Arvinta stood frozen and motionless, dazed by the shock, and listening to the plunging of the frightened mules.

Then Arvinta whispered, "Dexter—that man—he's dead. You killed him!"

"I didn't! I didn't!" the boy sobbed. "I couldn't, Vinty, truly."

A deadly chill shook her, and yet, when she reached for Dexter's rifle, her hands were slippery with sweat. "It was my fault. I did it. Don't forget. Whatever they ask you, Dexter, I was the one who shot him, not you. Give me the gun."

"No!" he cried.

She said fiercely, "Give it to me. I shot in self-defense, they won't blame me. Listen! They're coming."

Over hurrying footsteps sounded the excited voices of men and women aroused by the shot. Arvinta pushed her brother to one side. Gun in hand, she opened the canvas flaps and lowered herself to the ground, prepared to face whatever accusation might be made. But no one noticed her. She stood, sick and horror stricken, staring at a group gathered round a body—Hales's body—lying in a strangely contorted position.

A man turned at the sound of her gasping breath. "There she is!" he exclaimed, "She's the one who shot him."

A woman screeched, "Get that gun away from her! Where's the sheriff?"

They hustled her roughly toward the wounded man, so that she fell on her knees in a pool of darkness that was blood. The strange green light that comes just before dawn threw an unearthly glow over Hales's face.

His eyes were shut, but he muttered over and over, "My chest—my legs—my chest—"

Arvinta shuddered and swallowed hard. "Can't anyone help him? Isn't there a doctor?"

No one answered. She felt their eyes upon her, accusing, full of a dreadful speculation. Jim Bowles pushed his way through the milling crowd and put his arm around her shoulders.

"There isn't any doctor, Arvinta. We'll get him on a mattress and into the fort. They can take care of him better there."

But when they tried to lift him, the man screamed in an agony of pain. Suddenly, unbelievably, his eyes opened. They looked straight at Arvinta and knew her. His mouth twisted into a faint grin.

Hales spoke his last words. "Who's the cripple now?" he asked.

THERE was a strange paralyzed silence. And then slowly, inexorable as the crest of a wave that hangs suspended before it crashes, the crowd moved toward Arvinta. Jim's arm tightened as she turned to hide her face against his breast. His lips touched her hair.

"Don't be afraid, Vinty. I know you had a right to shoot. Look, here comes the fort sheriff and the captain. It's going to be all right."

"Let me through here," the sheriff ordered impatiently. He knelt beside the body. "Nothing to be done. He's dead, all right. Who killed him?"

A confusion of voices rose from the crowd. The captain held up his hand. "Now then, one at a time. You there in front—what happened?"

A woman said, "I heard the shot. That Arvinta Harris came from her wagon. She had a gun in her hand. She killed him, for sure. Everyone knows how she hated Hales."

There was an ominous murmur. The captain shouted, "Now, hold on. Wait a minute. Let's hear what she has to say. What about it, Arvinta?"

She faltered, "I—I had the gun—"

Dexter interrupted from the wagon, "Don't listen to her. She's lying, trying to save me. Help me down, someone."

He limped hurriedly to stand beside her. "I didn't even know it was Hales. All I could tell was that it was a man who had no business trying to get into our wagon. Sure, I shot, but only to scare him off. I didn't hit him."

The captain shook his head. "How can you prove you didn't? The man's dead, isn't he?"

"Look," the boy cried, pointing. "See where the shot went through the canvas above my bed? I aimed high on purpose. Hales got mixed up with the mules; that's how he got hurt. He forgot they were picketed right close by the wagon."

The sheriff was still on his knees by the body. "That boy's telling the truth. This man was kicked to death. There's no trace of a bullet wound that I can see." He got to his feet. "I'd say that's pretty quick thinking for a youngster. You did the right thing, kid."

The tension of the crowd broke. A woman stepped forward and kissed Arvinta on the cheek. Others followed, and the men shook her hand. "No blame to you or Dexter," they said. "He's a good boy."

The captain called for silence. "It's almost day, folks. Men, we'll bury Hales out on the prairie. And as long as he was alone with no kin, I vote that Arvinta and Dexter Harris take over his wagons. Maybe Jim Bowles will drive the big one, as long as he's footloose."

"I'd be proud to," Jim said.

Arvinta thanked him. "Remember, it will be my business to cook and wash for you in payment. And Dexter will do what chores he can, to help."

Jim smiled at her, and she looked away quickly. His eyes were warm and kind, but who could tell how a man, even a man like Jim Bowles, might treat a cripple who could do so little?

As if he were answering a question, Jim said, "You know, there's no reason for Dexter to spend so much of his time riding in the wagon. A boy on horseback can be mighty helpful and feel better too, maybe." He put his hand on Dexter's shoulder. "The tavern-keeper at the fort has a fine little pinto pony for sale, cheap. It's too small for a man. Want to take a look at it, kid?"

She watched the tall young man adjust his long stride to the youngster's limping gait. As they walked to the fort, the early light shone bright upon them. She turned and climbed into the wagon—her wagon and Dexter's now.

The sun is full risen, Arvinta thought. There's a glorious day ahead.

CLAIM SETTLED

BEN MILLER wasn't interested in getting any gold from the rich earth of Nevada. He was content making a steady, sure profit from his stage line which connected Ely with the newly constructed Central Pacific railroad. In addition to mail and passengers, Ben occasionally hauled gold bullion from W. G. Lyons's mill.

Ben based his freight rates on the declared value of the bullion carried, and he was considerably annoyed to find he was being put upon by Lyons, who was making a statement of value less than the true worth of the bullion entrusted to Ben. Yet Lyons's business was valuable.

Ben figured he'd been had to the extent of $1500 by a certain day when he whipped his stage out of town and headed for the junction. Fortunately there were no passengers aboard, and Lyons's bullion shipment that day would just about square off Ben's legitimate claim.

Hours later, Ben Miller returned to the stage depot, announcing he'd been robbed of Lyons's bullion. But when Ben reported the loss to Lyons, he remarked, "Don't think there'll be another robbery, Mr. Lyons—by anybody."

Lyons was equal to the occasion, and said slowly, "No, Ben, I don't think there will be either."

Lyons realized Ben had settled the claim, and respected him for it to the extent that he continued to express his bullion on Ben's stages. There never were any more gold holdups.

——Bob and Jan Young

OUT OF THE CHUTES

AS YOU read this, rodeo is coming out of its short winter sleep. Grandstands are being painted, arenas are being slicked up and rodeo committees are making plans for a great season in 1955.

But as we *write* this—though it's already well into the New Year—we still can't tell you who the champions were for 1954. We've made some predictions in the past; we've taken some well-informed guesses. And several times we've been wrong. So we're not going to talk about 1954 winners until they're official. Not till the Rodeo Cowboys' Association names its champs will we report on them. The RCA has its troubles, as reported in the current issue of *Rodeo Sports News:*

"We can't write about the 1954 Champions," says Editor Gene Lamb, "until we know who they are and until we get all the results in. Some of the results still out go back to last May, and it seems foolish to hope that they will still be sent in. And yet the race for All-Around Cowboy, Team Roping, Bareback and Steer Wrestling can easily be decided on less than 100 points, and those 100 points may be in one of the sets of results still out.

"There must be hidden complications," Gene continues mournfully and perplexedly, connected with the results of some rodeos, because on the surface sending them to the RCA seems a simple matter. The results of each rodeo must be made up before the winners can be paid off, so what is so difficult about writing down a copy of them and putting it in an envelope?'

Apparently the thing that bothers the RCA most is that all its efforts to get the results—by letter and by notices in the paper—are met with stony silence. "If only," Gene concludes, "they would write in and say, 'To hell with ya, we're not going to send them in,' then we could forget about them for the year and get on about our business."

Actually at this writing there are ten rodeo committees still to be heard from—far flung places like Alsask in Canada and a town in sunny Arizona with the unlikely name of Snowflake. Every one of those ten rodeo committees must know by now of its chance to name a rodeo champion for the year. You'd think every one of them would grab the chance to influence history—to put one cowboy's name in the record book, perhaps, and take another's out.

But with or without these possibly crucial results, the champs will be named soon. Just hold your breath till our next issue.

This column with its dearth of news reminds us of the joke about the five seasons in the clothing business—summer, autumn, winter, spring and slack. At the moment we're in the fifth season in the rodeo business, but we can promise you plenty of news soon.

The RCA is meeting for its annual convention in Denver, where the traditional first Rodeo Sports News Annual will soon be off the press. We hear it's as thick, almost, as the New York telephone book, and much more interesting reading. And next thing you know we'll be smack into the middle of the busy rodeo season, with cowboys flying from show to show and championship races getting hot again.

We'll end with another quote from *Rodeo Sports News,* a limerick from our poetess laureate, Rose Caulfield, called "Goose Egg."

"There was a young man from Revere
Who wanted to ride on a steer.
He fell in the dirt
And his ego was hurt
But not half so much as his rear."

Adios,

The EDITORS

Red Sundown

By RAY GAULDEN

Jean whispered, "Don't talk, Clay. Just hold me . . ."

THE STORY SO FAR:

Bigoted Banker VINCE RANDALL wants to clean up his town, starts by being on a jury which convicts FLOYD BURL of murder. But Floyd's brothers AL and PINTO help him escape, killing SHERIFF SAM KANE, stagecoach driver LEE DASH, and juryman MURPHY. The brothers threaten to kill the other jurymen at sundown. Meantime the brothers also kill DEPUTY SHERIFF BEN POE.

Terrified, Randall appeals to CLAY GANNON, a wild young rancher, to shoot down the Burls. Clay had gone to their stronghold to rescue MICHELLE (MIKE), little daughter of widow VALLA McCORD, and has told the Burls he will remain neutral.

Clay refuses Randall's offer. Randall asks his daughter JEAN, whose romance with Clay had been stopped by her father's disapproval, to promise to marry Clay if he will save her father.

CONCLUSION

CLAY helped Tom Jaden, the undertaker, carry Murphy's body to the furniture store and into the back room.

"That makes four of them," Jaden said, as he followed Clay to the front of the store. "Did you know that some of the boys tried to talk Ed Mack into taking the sheriff's job?"

"Hadn't heard about it."

"That must have taken a lot of gall," Jaden said, "after they had once kicked Ed out of office."

"Ed turned them down, huh?"

"Sure he did, and I don't blame him a bit. If I'd had my way, Mack would still be in office."

"But Randall had his way," Clay said moodily. "About that and a lot of other things."

Jaden stood looking out at the street. "I don't know why they've listened to Randall so much. Me, I've got a mind of my own."

"Then you're in a class by yourself," Clay said, and left the store.

He walked to the saloon. Blood was on the porch where Murphy had lain. He stepped around it and went inside.

The place was empty. The last time Clay had been in here Murphy had been sprinkling sawdust on the floor. He recalled nights when this quiet, deserted place had been jammed, and Murphy had been kept on the run.

He went behind the bar, picked up a glass, and eyed the row of bottles until he found one he wanted. He filled the glass and laid fifteen cents on the polished mahogany which made little sense now that Murphy was dead. But Clay wanted to pay for what he got in this town.

He took his glass to one of the tables and sat down, facing the slatted doors. He saw the place where Roy Dexter had carved his initials one night during a poker game. When closing time came they wouldn't go home, so Murphy had locked up. Clay had made a bed on the bar and gone to sleep.

He and Roy had pulled a lot of fool stunts in those days, but now Roy was married and doing all right. A man needed a wife, he thought—a woman to get behind him and push a little, and now and then let him know he wasn't working for nothing.

He thought of Jean again. Maybe after she'd thought it over for a while she'd see things his way. Maybe he had been expecting too much from a girl who had lived the kind of life Jean had.

She loved him; he was sure of it. And he loved her, wanted her so much he didn't know what to do. He frowned. Was there a difference between want and love?

He lifted the glass, his thoughts turning to Valla, sitting in the kitchen crying. Randall and a lot of others like him in this town—cold, unfeeling, and self-righteous — had pushed her beyond the limit of her endurance.

HE PUT the glass back on the table and moved it around in a small circle, remembering how he had tried to comfort her and, before he knew it, was kissing her. What had made him do it, or why that brief moment had left a lingering warmth inside him, he couldn't understand.

He had finished his drink when the slatted doors opened and Logan Baford, the preacher, walked in.

"Kind of out of place here, aren't you, Reverend?" Clay asked. "What's your congregation going to think?"

"Their minds are occupied with something else at present," Baford said with a tired smile. "Mind if I sit down?"

"Pull up a chair," Clay said. "I don't suppose you'd want a drink?"

"No," Baford said, taking a chair. "Not that I think there's anything wrong with it, providing a man can drink without getting drunk. That's never brought out in my sermons, though. The people who come to my church want hell-fire and brimstone, so that's what I give them. Then, too, I keep hoping that some day the Lord will give the people of this town wisdom."

"You've got more patience than I have, Reverend."

"It takes a great deal of patience, but more than anything else we need faith."

Clay asked, "You think those twelve men that were on the jury have any faith?"

"None of us has enough," Baford said heavily.

Clay gave way to his resentment. "They're part of your flock, Reverend. Why don't you tell them to get on their knees and ask the Lord to keep the Burls out of town?"

"I'm afraid the day of miracles is past," Baford said. "But sometimes the Lord works in strange ways."

Clay turned and looked at him. "I shot a man this morning, Reverend. Maybe he'll die and I'll be a killer. What do you think about that?"

"It's not for me to judge."

Clay glanced toward the street. "I've been judged by those people out there."

"I know. I've heard some of the talk."

Clay was quiet for a moment, staring at the street, thinking. Then he picked up his glass and walked behind the bar.

"You don't mind if I have another drink, do you, Reverend?"

"No, but I doubt that whisky will solve your problem."

Clay reached for the bottle, frowning as he poured a drink. "What problem have I got that you know about?"

"The one that concerns the town. You're wondering if you can stand by and watch what's going to happen, and do nothing about it."

"Why should I do anything?"

"Because it's your town, and you won't be able to forget it."

Clay laughed harshly. "You just watch me."

"Then you're more vindictive than I think."

"Don't try to throw me with those big words, Reverend."

"I mean I don't think you're the kind to carry a grudge, even after the way the town has treated you."

"Somebody's got you off on the wrong track, Reverend. I'm not mad at anybody—not enough to want revenge or anything like that."

"Why won't you help them then?"

"Because I want a better reason for dying."

CLAY moved the whisky glass around, regarding Baford for a time in silence. Finally he said, "You've got a pretty good way of getting your sermon across, but it's still a sermon. Did Randall send you here?"

"I haven't talked with Randall. I don't approve of many of the things he has done."

"Maybe not, Reverend, but I figure you're like everybody else in this town, ready to jump when Randall cracks the whip. I find it hard to rake up any sympathy for folks like that."

Baford put his hands on the table. "Perhaps today will show all of us, myself included, that we've been wrong."

Clay put the second drink away and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He said, "I'll see you later, Reverend," and walked out of the saloon.

This time, when he crossed the street, the rifle on the rim was still. He saw Shire and Witham and some of the other jury members, but there was no sign of Vince Randall. The sun, tilting westward, showed that it was about two and a half hours until sundown.

He turned in at Doc Nandeen's office and rapped on the door. Nandeen called for him to enter.

"How is Turk, Doc?" Clay asked.

"Better. Sleeping most of the time. He'll be all right now."

"You sure?"

"He's not the first men I've dug lead out of," Nandeen said. "Barring complications, he'll be on his feet in a couple of weeks."

Relieved, Clay looked at Hester. He was lying on his back with his eyes closed.

"He was awake for a while," Nandeen said. "Did a little talking. I don't think you'll have to worry about Turk any more."

Clay turned toward the door.

Nandeen, glancing at his watch, said, "Guess I'd better get together the things I'll need, in case some people are still alive after the Burls leave."

"I don't think you'll be very busy, Doc," Clay said, pausing in the doorway. "The undertaker's going to get most of the business."

When Clay reached the hotel, he went into the dining room where Valla was putting clean tablecloths on the tables.

"You didn't give Mike a licking, did you?" he asked.

"No, but I put her to bed, and she's not to ride Buttons for a week."

Clay got out his tobacco sack. "Aren't you being kind of hard on her?"

"A little punishment isn't going to hurt her," Valla said.

Clay shook tobacco into a wheatstraw paper, watching her as he shaped the cigarette. She was trying to keep busy, he thought, trying to keep her mind off what was coming. But the way she glanced at the street told him she was uneasy.

"I could get a rig," he said. "You and Mike would be safer out at the ranch."

"No, I'm going to stay."

"Why?"

"I have a business here to look after," she said, avoiding his searching stare.

"A lot of business you'll do this evening."

"Just the same, I'm not leaving."

HE FROWNED. What was in her mind? Why had she stayed here all these years? It was not sentiment; he was sure of that. The place made only a bare living. She would be better off in another town where people had never heard of Johnny McCord.

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

"I had something over at Kadee's."

She looked up with a half smile. "Taking your business elsewhere?"

"No, I just stopped in there to kill time. Randall sent for me, and I wanted to make him wait."

A question was in Valla's eyes. Clay smiled. "He tried to buy me. The high and mighty Vince Randall almost got down on his knees, saying all he'd do for me if I'd stop the Burls."

"What did you tell him?"

"Can't you guess?"

"I thought you wanted to get on the good side of him, Clay, because of Jean."

He turned away, staring out the window. "I had it out with Jean this morning. I asked her to marry me, and she turned me down."

"I'm sorry, Clay. I know how much you love her."

Something in her tone made him look at her closely but, before he could read her expression, she was on her way to the kitchen.

Then a rifle report drove thoughts of her from his mind. He crossed to the window but could not see what damage had been done.

Just a little while longer, he thought, another hour and forty-five minutes.

Troubled, he called to Valla, "I'm going down to the courthouse, but I'll be back before sundown."

"All right, Clay."

On the porch he stood for a moment scanning the street, noticing the broken glass on the east boardwalk. Briefly he wondered if Randall would stay in the bank or would try to make it home.

In front of the barber shop, Logan Baford was talking to a group of men. The preacher was a man that it would be easy to like, Clay thought.

He was having an uphill pull here in Marlnoot, but maybe some day he'd get his reward in that place folks talked about.

When Clay reached the back alley, he saw Tuggle and Hodges standing on the platform behind Tuggle's store.

"You boys found any place to hide yet?" Clay asked.

The two men shuffled their feet and looked away.

Clay went on to the courthouse.

Ed Mack was sitting on the courthouse steps when Clay came up. Clay sat down beside him and said, "I hear some of them propositioned you."

"Yeah. They started talking about maybe they'd made a mistake voting for Kane, and stuff like that."

"Did you tell them to go to hell?"

"Don't remember what I said, but I turned them down, all right."

CLAY stared along the street, thinking that the Burls would come in at the north end of town, that they'd probably go to the bank first.

"Did you know they got Murphy?" he asked.

"Yeah," Mack said. "Murphy wasn't much like his old man. I remember when Pat Murphy built the saloon. Pat used to wear the same red vest all the time. Finally his feet gave him trouble and he bought himself a high stool. I can see him sitting there now, back of the bar."

"How long ago was that, Ed?"

"So far back I can't remember. Let's see—his kid was about ten or twelve then. Used to come around the saloon, and Pat would run him off.

Mack chuckled softly and shook his head. "No, Pat wouldn't let his boy hang around the saloon till his feet swelled up so bad he just couldn't get around any more. But Murph never was the man his pa was. You could count on Pat, the same as you could a lot of others in those days—your dad, for instance."

"He thought you were all right, Ed."

Mack nodded. "We always got along. I called on him more than once to ride in a posse. One time we chased a couple of bank robbers all over hell's half acre and finally tracked them to where they were holing up in an old line shack. It looked like it was going to take some doing to smoke them out. But your dad said he'd be damned if he was going to miss his supper. So he ran up to that shack, kicked the door in, and, before we knew what was going on, he'd taken the guns away from those fellers and was marching them outside."

Clay looked at the jailer. An old man living in the past, his memories were all he had left.

"Yeah, those men were made of strong stuff," Mack said. "Now all we got is a stiff-necked, narrow-minded bunch without an ounce of guts in the whole pack."

Clay's moody gaze passed over the buildings. "This morning I shot Hester and they were calling me a killer, wanting to chase me out of town. They didn't want any part of my kind till you turned them down."

"You mean they hit you up, too?"

"Randall did. He said it was my chance to show what I was made of. When that didn't work he offered to make me a big loan."

"Damned if that's not good!" Mack said. Randall wanted to run you out of town, and he ends up trying to get you to save his neck."

"And the others went along with him."

"I know they did. But they didn't used to be that way, before Randall started pounding his ideas into their heads."

"What are they, a bunch of sheep?"

Mack said thoughtfully, "I reckon a lot of folks won't take the time to do their own thinking."

"As far as I'm concerned," Clay said, "they're all in the same boat."

"I know how you feel." Mack was scanning the street again. "Ever since they kicked me out of office, I've cussed them up one side and down the other, but today I found out something. I've been feeling sorry for myself, kidding myself into believing I was as good as ever. But it hit me today that I was wrong. A man can't help getting old, but he ought to have sense enough to see he can't do what a young man can."

"You've got a lot of years left, Ed."

Mack smiled dimly. "Funny, some men want to live so much, and lots of times they die young. But look at me. I haven't got a thing to stick around for, and I'll probably live to be a hundred. I'm just a pile of bones walking around. The only part of me that was any good is already buried with Martha, out there in the cemetery."

He was quiet for a long time, and Clay noticed that he kept massaging his arm and wincing now and then.

"Your arm hurt?" Clay asked.

"Old bullet wound. Never did heal right."

"Had a lot of lead dug out in your day, didn't you?"

"Quite a bit."

Clay glanced at the rim, then turned his attention to the hotel.

"I notice," Mack said, "you keep looking at Valla's place."

"I'm a little worried about her and the kid."

"Funny how people never can see what's right in front of their eyes," Mack said.

Clay turned his head and looked at the old jailer closely. "What are you getting at now?"

"Just running off at the mouth—like I'm doing all the time."

"No," Clay said, frowning. "You were trying to put something across. "What?"

"I was just thinking about Valla, and how she's been loving a man for a long time and trying to keep him from finding out about it."

"You're loco."

"Likely, but I'm not so plumb gone I can't see what's in a woman's eyes when she looks at a man. I've seen it in Valla's eyes more than once when she was looking at you."

"Funny I haven't seen it."

"She's been pretty careful not to let you catch on. And then, too, you've been hit so hard between the eyes by somebody else—"

Clay stood up, an odd feeling inside him. He said, grinning, "You've sure got a good imagination."

All Mack said, without taking his gaze off the street, was, "We don't have much longer to wait."

AFTER Clay left, Valla began to prepare the evening meal, though she doubted that many of her customers would be here to eat. She thought of Clay, and of how she had turned from him and hurried into the kitchen. She had been very careful not to let him know of her feelings for him. But much had happened today to unnerve her.

She glanced at the clock on the shelf beside the stove. There was only another hour and a half to wait. Then they would come, three men of vengeance, killing anyone who got in their way.

She was putting a stick of wood in the stove when a knock came at the back door. Valla looked around and saw Oliver Tuggle and Will Hodges standing there, their hats in their hands.

Tuggle nodded and Hodges, trying hard to smile, said, "Howdy, Mrs. McCord."

"Was there something you wanted?" she asked, with little warmth in her voice.

"We were wondering if we could get some coffee," Tuggle said.

It was the first time either of them had been here and, remembering some of the looks they had given her on the street, it was hard not to feel resentful.

She said, "I'm not in the habit of letting my customers come in the back door."

Hodges flushed. "We didn't want to take a chance going to the street, ma'am."

"Except for that," Valla said, "you'd have gone to Kadee's café where you usually go."

Each man looked at the other as if to say, you think of something to tell her.

"As long as you're here," Valla said, "come in."

They stepped inside, turning their hats in their hands. "If you don't mind," Tuggle said, "we'll have the coffee here in the kitchen."

"I do mind," Valla said. "The dining room is right through that door. There are tables far enough away from the street so you won't have to worry."

Both men colored, and Tuggle cleared his throat before leading the way into the dining room.

Their nerves were so frayed they needed the coffee, she thought, and found a small amount of satisfaction because they'd had to swallow their pride and come to her place. She filled two cups and took them to the table. They sat on the edges of their chairs and both kept looking at the street.

Hodges picked up a cup, his hand trembling so that some of the coffee slopped into the saucer. He took a sip and said, "That's mighty good. Brewed just right."

"A lot better than that slop Kadee puts out," Tuggle said.

Valla had started to turn away when Tuggle said, "Don't go yet."

"I have work to do," Valla said.

Hodges said, "Oliver and I have been doing a lot of thinking this afternoon."

"I imagine you have."

"Been sitting down there in back of the store," Tuggle said, "listening to them shoot my windows out, and trying to think of something we could do to stop them."

"You couldn't think of anything?"

"No," Hodges said. "And neither one of us had had any dinner, and now it's supper time but we're still not hungry."

"I can understand that," Valla said. "I doubt that anyone who was on the jury has been able to think about food."

"A cup of coffee was what Oliver and I kept wanting," Hodges said. "We knew we could come down the back alley to your place, but we weren't sure we'd be welcome after—"

"After the way you've talked about me?"

HODGES glanced at Tuggle, and she saw the bright shine of perspiration on his face.

"Seemed like we never had time before," Hodges said, "to get together and mull things over. Always too busy with one thing and another and letting somebody tell us what to do and how to do it. Got so it was kind of a habit, going along with Randall, figuring he knew what was best for us and the town." Men who are about to die, Valla thought, get troubled by conscience.

Tuggle's face was wet and he kept wiping it with a damp handkerchief. He said heavily, "We've decided we've been wrong about a lot of things. I haven't talked with the others, but I've a hunch they can see they've been wrong ,too. I guess we built Randall up into a tin god or something. But today he's scared

just like the rest of us, and there's nothing he can do to help."

"You came to the wrong place looking for sympathy," Valla said. "And as soon as you finish your coffee, I want you to leave. I certainly don't want you here when the sun goes down."

"We'll go in a few minutes," Hodges said. "We just wanted the coffee, and to get what we said off our minds, to let you know we feel kind of bad about it all."

It had taken them a long time to find out they were wrong, Valla thought. It was six years since Johnny had been killed—six years of listening to their whispers behind her back and seeing them turn their heads when she passed them on the street.

"The coffee will be ten cents," she said. "You can leave the money on the table."

She went into the lobby, stopping at the street door to look at the cliff, then at the stagecoach still standing in the middle of the street. This morning it had left Marinoot carrying the sheriff and his prisoner. Now the stage was back, and four men were dead and more were going to die.

She climbed the stairs and turned down the hall to her living quarters.

"Is that you, Mommy?" Michelle called from the bedroom.

"Yes," Valla said. "You can get up now and come downstairs."

Valla went to a closet, standing on tiptoe to reach the rifle on the top shelf. When she turned around with it, Michelle was watching her curiously.

"What are you going to do with that, Mommy?"

"Dr. Nandeen wants to borrow it to go hunting in the morning."

"Oh," Michelle said, hurrying to get her clothes on. "Do you suppose he'd let me go with him?"

"I'm afraid not," Valla said, turning back to the closet for a box of shells. "Now you finish dressing so we can go downstairs."

Valla, wanting to be sure where Michelle was, hurried her downstairs and to the dining room.

Michelle said, "Why are you so upset?"

"I just haven't got over being worried about you."

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

Michelle sat down at the kitchen table and put her feet on one of the chair rungs. "Mommy, you know those men I told you I saw at that old house?" Valla nodded. "Clay told me they were bad men. But he wasn't afraid of them. We rode right by there and they didn't try to stop us, either."

"You think Clay's pretty wonderful, don't you?"

"Next to you, I like him best of anybody."

Valla propped the rifle against the wall, and looked at her.

"You know," Michelle said, "when you made me go upstairs, I just lay in bed and thought, and I figured it all out—how you wouldn't have to work so hard and how we could be together more, and have a lot of good times and everything. If you and Clay were to get married, we could sell the hotel and move out to his ranch and—"

Valla was suddenly aware of an ache in her throat. She said, "People have to be in love before they can get married, or at least they should be."

"Well, doesn't Clay love us?"

Valla turned to the stove so that Michelle couldn't see her eyes. "We're just good friends," she said. "But that's different from being in love."

Michelle sighed. "Are you sure you don't love Clay?"

"I told you we're just good friends," Valla said, remembering the way he had held her and kissed her. But it hadn't meant anything.

Michelle looked thoughtful for a time. Then she said, "If two people were good friends, couldn't they get married and then maybe learn to love each other?"

"You're asking too many questions," Valla said. "And supper's ready."

A knock came at the back door. Jean Randall stood there, uncertainly. When Valla went over to her, Jean said, "I'm looking for Clay. I thought he might be here."

"He said he was going to the courthouse," Valla told her. "But he ought to be back soon."

Jean hesitated, glancing down the alley.

"Would you like to come in and wait?" Valla asked.

"No, thank you. I'll see if I can find him."

She was gone then, and Valla remained in the doorway, thinking, they quarreled this morning because she refused to marry him. And now she's changed her mind.

The small hope that had come to Valla this day was suddenly gone.

WHILE Clay was getting a drink of water in the sheriff's office, he saw Kane's badge lying on the desk where Mack had left it. He stood looking at it, thinking of all that had happened since he had come to town yesterday. How could so much have happened in such a short space of time? It was hard to believe, but he had seen it and been part of it.

Now, with time running out, he thought of eleven desperate men, and he couldn't feel sorry for them. What had they ever done for him, or for Valla, or for anybody else? Nothing—not a damned thing.

He put the tin cup back on the water cooler and went outside. Ed Mack was still sitting on the steps, watching the street.

"When I was a button," Mack said, his eyes on the stage coach, "I thought I'd like to be a stage driver after I grew up."

Clay didn't answer. He was looking at the bank. He saw Jean come out, pause for a moment, then walk swiftly across the street and turn in between two buildings.

"Wasn't that Jean Randall?" Mack asked.

Clay nodded and said, "See you, Ed."

He cut across the courthouse lawn, angling toward the first building and the alley behind it. Up on the rim the rifle was quiet. The Burls were likely saddling up, getting ready to ride. Beyond the cliff lay the Sangre de Cristo Range, its somber slopes already thick with shadows. The black clouds that had been gathering over the mountains were gone now, moving on south. And the sun, making its final bid for the day was turning the western sky red.

One more hour, he thought, and it would drop from sight.

As he turned into the alley, he glanced back at the courthouse and saw Ed Mack still on the steps, a forlorn figure in baggy pants and sweat-stained suspenders.

Clay went on down the alley, wondering what Jean was doing in town. She must be aware of the danger. He frowned when he saw her leave the back door of Valla's hotel and turn up the alley toward him. With still a block separating them he began to walk faster, and she was walking faster, too.

She was wearing a light blue dress she had worn one night on the creek. There was lace on the collar, and he remembered the feel of it between his fingers. The sight of her now, as always, made his insides ache with the need for her.

When they met he pulled her into a doorway, saying, "Jean, you shouldn't be here."

She was out of breath and her face was pale with strain, but she whispered, "Don't talk, Clay. Just hold me."

His hands were on her shoulders and they slipped down to her waist, drawing her to him. The discontent, the disappointment, and the lost hope were suddenly gone from him. She was his. The barrier between them was down.

When he looked down at her she said, "I know now that I was wrong this morning. Being with you is all that matters."

"Are you sure, Jean?"

"I think I knew it when you walked out of the house, but I wouldn't admit it then."

HE LOOKED down into her upturned face. "And you're ready to marry me?"

Her eyes didn't waver. "Now or any time you say."

"What about your father?"

"I feel sorry for him, Clay. He's so helpless now."

"He knows about us?"

She nodded. "He's so desperate he asked me to come to you, to try to talk you into helping him."

He said quietly, "Is that what changed your mind about us, why you're offering to marry me?"

"I want to marry you because I love you."

"And what about giving up all that you've been used to?"

"But don't you see, Clay, I wouldn't have to. You could sell the ranch and move to town. Dad would give you a job at the bank, or set you up in some kind of business." When he didn't answer, she said, "It's our chance at happiness, Clay. Can't you give in a little, if it means having what we planned for?"

"And all I've got to do to earn it is get myself killed."

"The town only needs a leader, someone to hold them together, to tell them what to do. Together you could stop the Burls."

He said, "Do you think I could be a town man?"

"Wouldn't it be better than what you're used to, working yourself to death trying to build something out of nothing?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, Clay," she cried, "is it so hard to decide, to know whether you really want me?"

"It's the terms I don't like."

"Forget them, Clay. You can if you want to badly enough."

He looked at her for a long, silent interval before he said, "I don't know, Jean. I just don't know."

"We haven't much time, Clay. It's almost sundown."

"Go home, Jean. Town's no place for you."

She shook her head. "I'm going back to the bank."

"You can't do that. The bank's the first place the Burls will head for."

"They won't bother me."

He stared at her. Her mind was made up to stay with her father and nothing he could say would change it. He walked to the street with her, conflicting thoughts filling his mind.

"I told Valla I'd stay at the hotel till it was over, Jean."

She stopped and looked at him searchingly. "All right, Clay. I'll be waiting for you."

She was gone then, hurrying across the street toward the bank. He stared after her until she was inside and out of sight. He thought of what she had offered him, and what Randall had offered him—a chance to make good, to show the people of this town that he was not what they thought, to prove to himself that he was headed in the right direction and not down the same trail the Burls had taken.

Jean could never adjust herself to his way of living, but would her kind of life be so hard to take? Wouldn't it be kind of nice having a house like one of those on Harwood, having money in the bank, security? Those things were what most folks were fighting so hard to get, so what was he waiting for? Besides, he'd have Jean. Wasn't that the important thing?

He walked to the hotel and stood on the porch, surveying the empty street. The townsmen had moved inside the stores now, and even the boardwalks were deserted. He saw tense, white faces at some of the windows. Remembering what Jean had said about their only needing someone to lead them, he thought, they wouldn't fight if they had ten leaders.

MIKE was calling to him from the lobby.

He glanced at the cliff and then stepped inside, picking her up when she ran to him. He held her and looked past her at Valla standing in the dining room doorway.

"Those men are coming, Clay," Mike said, "and everybody's afraid."

"You're not afraid, are you, Mike?"

She shook her head. "I told Mommy you wouldn't let them hurt us."

" 'Course I won't," Clay said putting her down. "But you stay close to your mom. You hear?"

"I will, Clay."

Valla stood there, saying nothing.

"You and Mike go in the kitchen," he said.

Valla nodded and, taking Michelle's hand, turned away.

Clay went to the front door, checking his gun as he stood looking beyond the cliff at the Sangre de Cristo Range. The sun, like a huge crimson ball, was poised there, almost as though it were aware of its significance and were trying to hold back.

The town was still, and the air was heavy with expectancy. A hawk flew over the buildings and was gone, winging its way toward the south. As if that were a signal, the sun dropped from sight, and Clay thought, this is it.

He moved onto the porch, looking toward the north end of Main Street, the way he knew they would come. Then something drew his attention in the other direction and held it there.

Ed Mack was coming down the center of the street, his shoulders straighter than Clay had seen them in a long time, his step firm and deliberate. The badge, pinned to his left suspender, gleamed faintly.

When he was close, Clay called into the silence, "Ed, you damned fool, get off the street!"

Mack veered and came over to the hotel porch. With his eyes still on the street, he said, "I thought I could sit there and do nothing, but I couldn't."

"You'll just get yourself killed, Ed, and for what?"

"That's a good question, but I can't answer it."

The silence grew heavier, more ominous, and then from the north end of town came the murmur of hoofs, as riders, still out of sight on the creek trail, rode toward the main road.

Clay swore under his breath. He couldn't stand here and see Mack walk out there to meet them alone—one old man against three killers. Maybe he couldn't have stood there anyway. Maybe it was because of something the preacher had said about its being his town, or perhaps it was because of Jean. He didn't know what it was.

He only knew that he was leaving the porch, saying to Mack, "Wait here. I'll try to talk to them."

Then he was walking toward the north end of town, and he was remembering that the preacher and Jean both had said that all the men needed was a leader, and they would fight. He looked at the faces watching him from the windows. He thought, all right, you've got somebody to lead the way. Now what are you waiting for?

No doors opened; no one appeared. There would be just Ed Mack and him.

He walked on, past the doctor's office, and it seemed a long time ago now since he had shot Turk Hester. He passed the bank and had a glimpse of Jean in the doorway, before Alex Norris came over and drew her back inside.

Married to the daughter of the town banker, he thought, with a house on Harwood Street, he could get to be somebody pretty big. He could trade in his boots for buttoned shoes like Alex wore. There would be no more getting up before daylight, or polishing the seat of a saddle all day. He could be a business man, smoking cigars, and going home to the woman he wanted.

THE hoofbeats were louder now and he began to run, heading for the livery stable, reaching the barn as the Burls came in sight. The three of them, Al and Pinto and Floyd, rode side by side, holding their horses back as if they had all the time in the world.

The livery stable was the first building at the edge of town, and Clay stood in the doorway, his hand close to his gun, the smell of manure strong in his nose. He glanced back the way he had come, and there was still no one on the street except Ed Mack, an old man with his memories, who likely didn't know, himself, why he was doing this. The last of a vanishing breed, Clay thought admiringly.

The brown dirt of the road was dry. The stagecoach in the middle of the street had been gleaming when it left town this morning. Now it was covered with dust.

The Burls drew nearer and he saw the dust kicked up by their horses, little puffs that rose and settled slowly. They were three men coming to kill, wanting to kill. He saw the hate in their eyes and fear crawled in his stomach, knotting it. For one brief moment he considered getting out of sight, opening up on them before they spotted him. That way he might have a chance. But he knew he couldn't do it.

When they were close to the barn, he reached for his tobacco sack, starting to make a cigarette as he called to them, "Better hold up, boys."

They reined up in the middle of the street, hands on the butts of their guns as they looked at him.

"You going to try stopping us?" Floyd asked.

Clay shook his head. "Just want to let you know they're waiting for you down there—a dozen men with rifles."

Al and Pinto looked along the street, then looked at Floyd, whose eyes held steadily on Clay.

"So you're doing us a favor," Floyd said, smiling with one side of his mouth, "tipping us off for old times' sake."

Clay managed to get the cigarette lighted, but there was sweat in the palms of his hands, and his shirt was sticking to his back.

He said, "Hate to see you get yourselves killed."

"You hear that, boys?" Floyd asked, without even glancing at his brothers. "Gannon's real worried about us."

Pinto said, "Yeah." Al said nothing.

Clay pulled smoke deep into his lungs, trying to keep calm, but his heart was beating fast. Fear had hit him, too, had turned his insides cold, made it hard for him to stand here and face them.

Floyd said, "How dumb do you think I am?"

Clay shrugged. "It doesn't make any difference to me what you do, but I figure you'd be smart if you turned around and rode in the other direction."

"Doesn't he know us better than that?" Pinto asked.

"He ought to," Al said.

Floyd didn't take his eyes off Clay. "I've lived on this range long enough," he said, "to know what kind of people we got in Marinoot. They're a gutless pack of yellow-bellies, every one of them, and right now they're shaking so bad they couldn't hold a gun if they wanted to."

"You might get fooled," Clay said, still trying to bluff them. But he knew, as he had known all the time, that he was wasting words, prolonging something that was bound to come.

"I told you," Floyd said, "I'd kill you as quick as anybody else that got in my way."

The talk was finished, and Clay knew it. He saw Floyd reaching for his gun, saw it coming up smooth and fast. Then Clay was moving back out of the light into the dimness of the barn. His own gun was in his hand as Floyd cut loose.

WITH Clay on the move Floyd missed, and before he could fire again his horse reared, spoiling his aim. Al and Pinto had their guns out now, but Clay put a shot so close to them they must have realized what good targets they made out in the open.

Floyd spurred his horse for the barn, but away from the doorway. Al and Pinto started to follow him, but when Clay fired again they

[*Turn page*]

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jerked their mounts around and rode in the other direction.

Clay, at the head of the runway, heard Floyd call to Al and Pinto, "Get on uptown. I'll take care of this one."

The clatter of hoofs told Clay that Al and Pinto were riding away from the barn. They couldn't have gone far when a rifle opened up, and Clay thought, give 'em hell, Mack!

Back in one of the stalls a horse stamped, the sound loud in the silence. From outside the barn came the squeak of saddle leather as Floyd left his horse. Clay had expected him to be more careful coming in, but suddenly he was there, ducking around the doorway as if in a rush to get it over with.

Clay fired, and the bullet ripped wood from the door casing close to Floyd's head. But the man was bent over and moving fast. Inside now, he threw himself down behind a bale of hay and fired over the top of it. The bullet, catching Clay high in the left arm, drove him back.

Off balance, he hit one of the stalls, twisted, and went into it. Before he could catch himself his shoulder struck the rump of a dappled gray, and the horse jumped, but did not kick. Clay dropped to one knee, feeling the blood run down his arm, setting his teeth against the pain.

Clay stuck his head out of the stall and shot twice, both bullets burying themselves in the bale of hay behind which Floyd lay.

There was shooting on the street, but it died down, and Pinto yelled, "Floyd, get out here!"

Floyd cursed and sent another shot into the stall, but Clay pulled back in time. When he looked again, Floyd was backing out of the barn. Clay got up and moved down the runway. In the dim light he didn't see the harness on the floor, but his foot caught in it and he stumbled and went down, landing on his wounded arm. He groaned and had to lay there a moment, fighting the pain before he could get up and go on. By the time he reached the doorway Floyd was on his horse and riding away from the barn.

A glance along the street showed Clay the reason Pinto had called. From the alley beside the bank came a buggy, skidding as it turned into the street. Vince Randall was alone in the rig, sitting on the edge of the seat and whipping the team on. Before the buggy was lined out toward the south end of town, Clay had a glimpse of the banker's gray face and heard his voice, hoarse with panic, yelling at the horses.

There went a man who had stuck it out through the long day, Clay thought, hoping until the last minute that something would happen to keep the Burls out of town. He had been sitting there in the middle of all his money, and cracking slowly under the strain of waiting, until fear had driven him to make a break, a last desperate gamble to escape death.

TAKING his eyes off the buggy, Clay saw that Al and Pinto had left their horses in the middle of the street. Evidently they had been forced to take cover as Ed Mack, in the alley between the hotel and Miller's butcher shop, concentrated on them with his rifle. Pinto was on his knees at the north end of Tuggle's porch, while Al had dropped down behind a water trough in front of the store.

Clay stepped out of the barn door, shooting at Floyd as he moved down the street. Floyd twisted around in his saddle and threw a quick shot at Clay, but Clay made it to the next building. There he drew up trying to get his sights lined on Floyd. He pulled the trigger and the hammer clicked on an empty.

Floyd appeared undecided. He looked at the buggy, which had now reached the end of the street and was making the turn around the courthouse, and he looked at Ed Mack who stood between him and Randall.

Finally Floyd called to his brothers, "Keep that old lobo busy, and watch Gannon. I'm going after Randall."

In the protection of a doorway Clay reloaded, fumbling the shells in his haste. The buggy was out of sight when Floyd started after it, but he hadn't gone far when Ed Mack opened up. Floyd jerked his horse around and came back. He shot again at Clay, then spurred his horse between two of the buildings, heading for the back alley. That way, Clay knew, he could get past Mack and go on after Randall.

With his gun loaded now, Clay stepped from the doorway, his eyes on Pinto's horse in the street. He moved to the next building, then ran out and caught the horse's reins. As he swung into the saddle, Valla appeared at the hotel doorway with a rifle in her hands.

Pinto Burl stopped shooting at Mack and ran into the street, firing as he came, trying to stop Clay. The horse was in motion when a bullet ripped leather from the horn. Clay, glancing around, saw that Pinto's gun was lined on his spine. But before Pinto could pull the trigger, something hit him and he went back several steps.

Clay had a glimpse of Valla's face, and knew it was she who had shot Pinto. Then he was past the hotel, pushing his horse hard. When he made the turn around the courthouse square, he saw Floyd on the trail ahead. The buggy was out of sight.

At the turn-off to the creek trail, Floyd left the main road. Randall must have gone that way. Ten minutes later Clay saw the buggy, but there was no sign of Randall. Evidently when Floyd had been about to overtake him, the banker had left the rig and taken to the brush along the creek.

Then he saw Floyd's horse, reins trailing on the creek bank, and he had a glimpse of Randall as the banker broke into a small clearing, threw a desperate glance over his shoulder, and plunged into the dense willow thickets.

CLAY rode farther up the creek, then slid out of the saddle and darted into the willows not far behind Floyd and Randall. He could hear them crashing through the brush, one in headlong flight, the other stalking.

The brush thinned and Clay lifted his gun, firing when he caught sight of Floyd. Burl turned, shot twice without stopping, then went on, closing the distance between Randall and himself.

Clay moved ahead, hearing the brush cracking and popping, but seeing nothing to shoot at. He held his wounded arm across his chest. It did not seem to hurt so much now. The brush scratched his face, but didn't stop him.

[*Turn page*]

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Reaching another small clearing, Randall, with a wild glance at his surroundings, turned and ran into the creek, slipping on the wet rocks. Just short of the far bank he stumbled and went down, sending up a spray of water. As he was struggling frantically to get to his feet, Floyd fired. The bullet knocked chips from a boulder not a foot from Randall's head.

Clay's gun drew Burl's attention then, kept him occupied while Randall scrambled out of the water and dived into the brush lining the far bank. Burl, face set with determination, started toward Clay as though he had at last realized he would have to stop Gannon before he could get to Randall.

Not more than ten feet separated them when Clay pulled the trigger. And this time he knew he hadn't missed. Floyd came to a halt, weaving, then began to stagger backward, the cords in his neck standing out as he tried to raise his gun and couldn't. At the edge of the creek he went reeling into the water. He made it as far as a sand bar, but there he fell, the toes of his boots in the water.

Clay stood on the bank. He didn't have to go any closer to know that Floyd Burl was dead. One outstretched hand had clawed at the sand for a moment, as if, with the last strength that was in him, Floyd had been trying to get closer to Randall.

Sickness was in Clay's stomach, but it was not as bad as the sickness he had felt after shooting Hester. He looked across the stream and called, "All right, Randall, you can come out now. Floyd's dead."

The banker parted the brush and peered out cautiously before he came into the open. With visible relief he crossed the creek and stopped close to Clay.

"You saved my life, Gannon."

"Yeah," Clay said. "But I don't want any thanks."

Randall sat down on a rock and wiped sweat from his face. He looked stunned, bewildered. "It was a fool thing for me to do, running like that," he said. "But I thought there was no one to stop them."

"I guess you know where you stand now," Clay said.

Randall nodded slowly. "Yes. I'll never be able to face the others, not after running."

He dropped his face in his hands, and for a moment Clay felt almost sorry for him.

"There are other towns," Clay said. "A man can always start over."

Randall looked up at Clay. "Tell Jean that I'm all right, that I'll write to her."

Clay nodded and went back to his horse, leaving behind him one man who was dead and another who would find it hard to go on living.

WHEN he reached town the street was full of people, and the tension that had held Marinoot since the trial was gone. Ed Mack was marching Al Burl toward the courthouse. Al's holster was empty and he was stumbling along, holding his right shoulder.

Clay pulled over to the edge of the walk, and Mack asked, "Floyd?"

"He's dead," Clay said.

"So's Pinto," Mack said. "And this one'll go to Canon City for a long time."

"Randall's leaving town," Clay told him.

Mack smiled faintly. "They're all asking me to keep the job."

"Like I said, Ed, you've got a lot of years left yet."

"I could use a depty."

Clay shook his head. "I've got a ranch to look after."

Al Burl said sullenly, "You gonna let me bleed to death before you get the doc?"

"I'm going to put you in a cell first," Mack said. "From the looks of that arm of yours, Clay, you'd better get over to Nandeen's yourself."

Clay nodded and rode on. Tuggle and some of the others spoke to him with a warmth that had never been in their voices before. He went through the crowd and stopped at Nandeen's office. The bullet hadn't lodged, the doctor told him. It was only a flesh wound.

With one arm bound, Clay came out as Jean was stepping onto the porch. She ran to him and he held her lightly with his one good arm, but he was gazing beyond her at the hotel.

"Your dad's all right," he told her. "But he said he couldn't come back here, that he'd let you know where he went."

RED SUNDOWN

She looked up at him. "I told you I'd be waiting, Clay."

Again his eyes went beyond her, and he said, "I tried to see it your way, Jean, and for a little while I thought I could, but now I know it wouldn't work out."

"But why, Clay?"

"We thought we had something pretty wonderful, but it didn't go deep enough to last."

"Clay!"

"Down inside, Jean, I think you know I'm right."

She didn't answer, and after a moment she left the porch and started up the street. Clay saw that Alex Norris was waiting in front of Kadee's café. Alex joined Jean, and the two of them walked slowly toward the bank.

"Clay! Clay!"

He faced the hotel. Mike was running toward him working her way through the crowd. When she reached him, he picked her up with his right arm and walked toward the hotel. Valla was standing in the doorway now, and he smiled at her. She was smiling, too, as she came on the porch to meet him.

THE END

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 89)

1. Jim Bridger—mountain man and scout; George W. Saunders—Texas trail driver, Bill Tighlman—law officer.
2. It means either "good morning" or "good day."
3. Colorado Plateau.
4. Arthur Chapman.
5. Piñon, pronounced peen-YONE.
6. San Antonio, Tex.
7. A *ramal* is an extension braided onto the ends of bridle reins to be used as a whip. A quirt is a short braided riding whip *not* attached to anything else.
8. New Mexico.
9. Cougar.
10. Myrtle wood.

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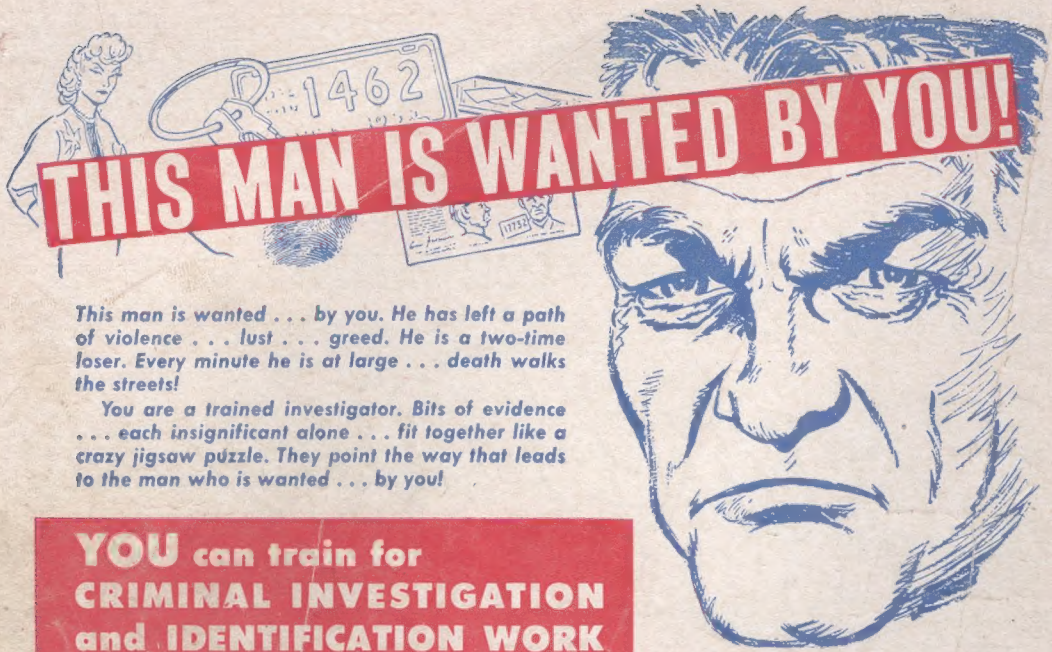

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